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WILL WILDFIRE IN THE WOODS: or, CAMP LIFE IN THE ALLEGHANIES.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS," "PHIL HARDY," "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HANDSOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.



WHILE HIS EYES, THAT ROLLED LIKE BALLS OF IVORY IN A BASIN OF INK, FORMED THE ONLY RELIEF TO HIS MIDNIGHT COMPLEXION.

Will Wildfire in the Woods;

OR,

Camp Life in the Alleghanies.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "MIKE MERRY," "BLACK BESS," "WILL WILDFIRE," "HANDSOME HARRY," "DETECTIVE DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ARCHERY MATCH.

THE sun shone warmly down upon the broad East Meadows, as the wide grassy mead was called, so brilliant now with the gay multitude gathered upon its verdant surface. On either side a stretch of woodland walled in the scene, declining on the south to a hawthorn hedge, and on the north to a shallow, brawling creek, beyond which a thicket of oak and hazel closed the prospect.

It was, indeed, a charming silvan retreat, shut in with green walls from the outer world, and with the beams of an October sun pouring the genial warmth of the Indian summer weather upon its verdant confines.

The sound of loud and merry voices filled the air, from the gayly-dressed throng of ladies and gentlemen who occupied this green recess of nature. The rattling of quivers, hung with silken scarfs from their shoulders, and the sharp twang of bow-strings, revealed the fact that this was a meeting for the exercise of the old and honorable art of archery. The same fact was evidenced by the broad target, which stood near the eastern forest, with an arrow still quivering just inside the outermost of its concentric circles.

The archers were gathered on a smooth spot near the creek, and were warmly criticising the effect of this last shot.

"Who is next?" cried one, a bright-haired, blue-eyed maiden, with a face like a peach blossom. "That shot will never carry away the honors."

"Harry Waters," was the reply, as a light-built, handsome young man stepped actively up to the line.

He had thrown back his cap, and the ruffled hair clustered over his forehead. He tried his bow, which yielded the clear twang of a harp-string. Dropping the end of the curved wood to the ground, he commenced to select an arrow with great care.

"Is he a good shot?" whispered the young lady who had before spoken.

"That I could not say," returned her friend. "I have never seen him draw a bow."

"Well, at any rate, he has not much to beat," with a suggestive shrug.

Adjusting the arrow to the string, the contestant slowly bent the strong bow, taking careful and deliberate aim, his eye fixed with a keen glance on the distant target.

A sharp twang. The arrow had sped. Every eye followed the winged missile, that shot through the air like a line of light, and buried its iron point in the surface of the target.

"A bull's-eye!" cried one, hastily.

"A bull's-eye? Where do you keep *your* eyes?" sarcastically asked a second, a tall, gigantic-framed person, whose looks were keenly fixed upon the quivering arrow. "Why, it's outside the inner circle, a good six inches from the center. Come, come, Harry, you will have to do better than that, if you want to carry off the honors."

"Maybe you can beat it," retorted Harry, a little nettled.

"Me? Why I haven't tried a bow and arrow since I used to have a boy's fun, shooting at ground squirrels in my native Buck's county woods. Besides, it's the ladies' turn. I would not rob the fair Clara of her chance for a kingdom."

The young lady who had now taken Harry Waters's place, turned with a smile toward the speaker, revealing a beautiful face, bright with youth and clear with hope.

"I am much obliged to Mr. Browning; I am sure," came in musical tones from her lips. "His politeness is really delightful, under the circumstances. But he can have his much-desired opportunity after I get through."

"No, no!" returned the laughing giant hastily. "I won't steal your honors. There are others ahead of me. Go on. I am satisfied to repose on my old laurels."

"I should fancy you would not sleep easily on them," retorted the fair contestant. "They must be dreadfully faded. It would be best to add some fresh ones to the mass."

Her bow seemed rather firm and stout for her delicate hands. It was stained of a bluish tint, and stretched with a cord of crimson silk. Carefully selecting an arrow, with feathers of the same tint of blue, she fitted it to the cord, standing erect with a supple grace that was a picture to behold.

"Look at Clara Moreland," cried the blue-eyed nymph who had spoken before. "Isn't she handsome and graceful? And I am told she is the best shot in the Robin Hood Club."

"I have never seen her shoot," was the reply. "She is a wonderful rider, though. Why, I believe she would not be afraid to dash down a precipice on her black horse, Selim."

"They say she is engaged to be married to Will Wildfire," continued the nymph. "But, where is he? It is not often he lets any sport escape him."

"I should fancy this business to be out of his line."

"No, indeed, it is not! They practiced archery at Yale, and I am told he was as good with the bow as with the oar."

"Hush! She is going to shoot!"

The whole assembly was still in intense expectation as the graceful archer stood, with her left side presented to the target, and the bow, lifted to the level of her eyes, drawn with a strength and skill that could hardly have been expected from her delicate hands.

Her eye glanced quickly along the leveled arrow. An instant, and the released string twanged with a sharp, keen sound. The arrow flew across the level plain, and struck the target with a clear thud, near its center.

A simultaneous outburst of applause came from the admiring throng.

"Good!" "Fine!" "The best shot to-day!" "Is it a bull's-eye?" "No." "Not an inch from the center, anyway!" were some of the admiring comments on the shot, while a perfect medley of excited remarks arose in the crowd surrounding the archers.

Clara stood a little aside, her face flushed with pardonable pride, while these flattering comments on her skill met her ear.

"How is it?" was the cry, as the measurers of the shot returned with the victorious arrow. "Has it touched the bull's-eye? Is it a center?"

"Just outside the bull's-eye," was the announcement, "about two and a half inches from the center. The best shot to-day by a good three inches."

Clara was instantly surrounded by her friends, who vied with each other in warm congratulations.

Several other contestants followed, with varied success. Finally the pretty young lady, who had been so free in her comments on the previous competitors, stepped forward, bearing a slender, delicate bow, that seemed but a toy as compared with those used by some of the others. Her blue eyes glittered with excitement as she took her stand, while she pushed back the wealth of golden hair, that seemed bent on getting into her eyes.

"Come, come, Miss Darling!" exclaimed the huge fellow who had before spoken, while a mischievous smile played around his lips. "It is hardly fair to the rest for you to enter. There will not be a ghost of a chance with one who shoots two ways, with an arrow from your bow at the target, and a twin pair of arrows from your eyes at the hearts of the poor men."

"I would hardly like to try a center shot at *your* heart," she saucily replied. "I would not care to have my arrows blunted."

"Me? Why I am as soft-hearted as a baby. You have shot me through and through before now."

"You don't dare to match me at the target, at any rate," she retorted, in a tone of slight vexation.

"I would advise you not to be too sure of that. I never refuse a fair challenge."

"Very well, then," quickly replied the lady. "You can shoot after me. We will see what right you have to come here and criticise us."

"Beware, misguided female," returned her opponent. "Beware how you invite defeat."

"I do not fear your skill," was her laughing response, as she quickly drew her light bow, and shot the arrow seemingly without aim.

"A pair of gloves against a kiss it does not touch the target," challenged the laughing giant.

"Done!" cried the blue-eyed archer, with a saucy look. "Mind, sir, I shall hold you to your wager."

"And mind, miss, I shall hold you."

The arrow, at this instant, reached the target, and buried its point in its outer edge, almost missing it.

"The gloves are mine," she cried gayly.

"But, oh! how desperately near you were to be being kissed," he maliciously rejoined.

"No matter. It is your turn now."

"But I have no bow."

"Borrow one then. You shall not escape so easily."

With a groan of affected dismay, Mr. Browning turned, and borrowed a bow and arrow from one of his friends.

"Prepare now, ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "to see a display of skill that will put to the blush the celebrated Locksley of the past. Prepare to crown Pierce Browning, the modern Robin Hood."

"A silk purse to a necktie you don't touch the target," exclaimed Miss Darling.

"Done!" cried the archer. "You have robbed me of a pair of gloves. I am good for a purse in their place."

The carelessness of his shot even exceeded hers. The arrow flew without any apparent aim.

"A center!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, the center of the woods," she retorted, while a loud laugh of amusement arose as it became evident that the arrow had flown wide of the target.

"It has gone clear through," he sturdily declared.

"Look, and you will find the hole it has made."

"A pretty broad hole, through that clump of oak timber," suggested a voice. "You can add the necktie to the gloves, friend Pierce."

Miss Darling turned quickly at the voice.

"Ah! here is the missing archer now. They have been waiting for you, Mr. Wildfire."

"Better late than never," replied the new-comer, as he stepped forward.

He was a handsome, athletic, well-built youth, with a smooth face except for a budding mustache, and a very frank and engaging expression of countenance. There was something, especially taking in his clear and genial eye, while his whole face seemed instinct with honor, courage and gayety.

"Will Wildfire!" exclaimed a dozen voices. "What has kept you? Your name was called a half an hour ago."

"Business," he sententiously replied. "You will

have to excuse me. I am not in the best of humor for shooting to-day."

"No, sir," retorted Pierce Browning. "You must take your chance. You didn't find me back down when I was called upon."

"You couldn't very well help yourself," rejoined Will, with a glance at the smiling face of Miss Darling. "Lend me a bow, then. I will go through the motions."

While they were procuring him a bow he turned to Pierce Browning, and whispered in his ear:

"There is some fun afloat, my boy. The devil is unchained."

"What?—Mark—"

"Hush! It's a fact though. *Pardon out!*"

A grimace passed over Pierce's expressive countenance, while Will turned, with an unchanged look, and took the bow which the master of the field had obtained for him.

"I presume I may as well be beaten as any one," he laughingly remarked. "Who stands best now?"

"Miss Clara Moreland," was the reply.

"Ah!" said Will, looking around, and catching an expressive glance from the young lady in question, while he answered with a warm smile.

"It would be unfair to beat the lady," he remarked, fitting the arrow to the string.

A pause of expectation followed. None there had seen the new archer shoot, but his well known skill in other sports gave them hope of marked ability in this, and every eye was fixed upon his tall and graceful figure, as he drew himself up to his full height, and bent the flexible bow, with the full power of a strong hand. The string touched his right ear; an instant he glanced along the arrow; every breath was held in expectation.

But at this instant a sharp report, as of a rifle-shot, came from the thicket, and the archer's hat, struck by the bullet, was torn from his head, and dashed to the ground, twenty feet away.

A closer setting of the lips was the only evidence of emotion in Will Wildfire's face, as he quickly wheeled around upon his heel, with the bow still bent to its utmost stretch.

A faint puff of smoke was rising above a spot in the center of the thicket.

A sharp twang announced that the arrow had fled, aimed with instant but steady aim at the spot which sheltered this secret assassin.

And quick as a flash Will had followed his arrow, across the stony creek and into the thicket.

"Follow me, Pierce!" he cried. "The devil is loose, in good earnest!"

CHAPTER II.

WILL WILDFIRE'S BAREBACK FEAT.

FRONTING on Fairmount avenue, Philadelphia, at a point West of Twentieth street, stands a gloomy and imposing edifice, whose massive turreted towers and crenulated walls give it the appearance of a Norman castle, of those old times when might ruled right over the fair domains of England and France.

Its object, however, is widely different from that of the castellated structures of the past. They were built to keep people out; this to keep them in; for it is what is locally known as Cherry Hill prison, or, to give it its formal title, the Eastern Penitentiary of Pennsylvania.

In a cell in the interior of this edifice, sits a small framed, rather handsome man, though with something in his glance that is not of the most prepossessing character. The cell he occupies is clean and neat, but very sparsely furnished. It opens in the rear upon a small garden plot, just large enough to give a breath of fresh air, and a scant opportunity for exercise to the weary prisoner.

He has, however, an opening for exercise of another character, in the bench, tools and materials of a shoemaker, which sit at one side of his cell, and with which he is required to employ himself, for the performance of a certain task.

Just now he is seated on the edge of his cot, using his shoemaker's knife in idly cutting thin strips of leather from a piece which he holds in his hand; while an expression of bitter malignity plays upon his features.

"I will be even with him yet," he hoarsely remarks. "They cannot keep me here, with all the influence I have brought to bear upon the Pardoning Board. Once let me out of this infernal cell, and I will make him feel what revenge means in the heart of Mark Preston. He has had his day. Mine will come yet."

He sat brooding in sullen silence for some minutes, cutting the leather with a peculiar savage energy, as if he fancied it the heart of his foe. His expression grew more bitter and malignant.

"Robbed of my fortune first," he muttered. "Of my bride next, and then of my liberty. Besides all the minor favors which I owe to his generosity. Let him take heed. He has sown a deep harvest of revenge, which he shall yet reap. I swear it, as I am a living man!"

Furiously flinging down the implements which he held in his hands, he sprang to his feet and walked briskly along the narrow confines of the cell, his lips working with inaudible sentences.

"When will I get out of this cell?" he furiously exclaimed. "When will I get at my mortal foe? Oh! that I could tear down these accursed walls, and break again into the light of day and of liberty!"

He paused in his furious walk. The sound had reached his ears of steps advancing along the prison aisles, and stopping opposite his door. Voices were next heard.

"Is this the cell?"

"Yes, Number 79. Here is the name, you see. Mark Preston."

"Yes, yes. That seems right. Open the door."

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The prisoner stood with something of the aspect of a wild-cat, the door of whose cage is being unfastened. The intense look of one thirsting for liberty and revenge.

The open door displayed the forms of the jailer of that corridor, and of a burly, well-dressed individual, who bore about him an air of authority.

"Mark Preston. Is that your name?" he asked, examining a formidable-looking document which he held partly open in his hand.

"Yes," replied the prisoner, the hungry look deepening in his eyes.

"In for six years, as an accomplice of a gang of burglars?"

This question was addressed to the keeper.

"This is your man," replied the latter, brusquely. "Then, by virtue of the document which I hold, signed by the Governor and the State Board of Parcels, you are pardoned for this offense, and are hereby freed from detention."

A flash of joy, that had in it something of savage exultation, shot across the prisoner's face. But, by strong self-control, he repressed any further evidence of feeling, and said, with assumed sternness of tone:

"I don't know that an innocent man owes many thanks to the State officials for releasing him from false imprisonment. I thank you, though, for your trouble. I am weary enough of this villainous dog's hole."

The official looked with an air of wonder at the prisoner, whose eyes were turned with a savage glare upon the walls of his cell. A significant shrug of the shoulders, and he commenced to read the document he held, the prisoner listening with ill-concealed impatience to its legal verbiage.

"Let me congratulate you upon your release," continued the official. "Mr. Walker, you will see to Mr. Preston's further needs."

He turned upon his heel, as if offended at the lack of response to his polite remark in the prisoner's expression.

"A rat don't often thank the kind gentlemen who shut him up in a trap," muttered Preston, as he followed the keeper from his discarded cell.

A half-hour afterward the wicket in the great iron gates of the prison opened, and Mark Preston stepped out into the free air of the streets and under the open light of the heavens. A remarkable change had taken place in his appearance. His prison garb was discarded, and he wore the well-cut, fashionable attire which had been taken from him when entering the prison. Cleanly shaved, his long mustache curled in the French fashion, and a well-fitting hat concealing his closely-clipped head, no one would have dreamed that this dapper individual had been, an hour before, an inmate of a prison cell, a convicted felon.

Mr. Walker, the keeper, bade him a kindly God-speed at the gate, and the freed convict walked briskly away, his face working with the conflicting emotions that filled his mind.

"It was lucky that I received that other legacy," he muttered, "or my losses on the turf, and in other ways, might have forced me to take up my new trade of sheepstealing for a living. I must see how my affairs stand. I can take my time in paying my respects to my friend, Will Wildfire."

Leaving him to his devices, we must return to the scene of the archery meeting, whose sport had been so signally interrupted. An intense confusion followed the rifle-shot, which had seemed evidently aimed at Will Wildfire. The screams of women were mingled with the cries and ejaculations of men. The group for an instant huddled together, like a frightened herd of deer that hears the huntsman's shot. Some of the ladies clung nervously to their gentleman friends for protection.

This excitement was partly occasioned by the hasty exclamation and quick action of Will Wildfire. The brawling creek ran swiftly in its shallow bed, with frequent stones lifting above its swirling waters. Leaping from stone to stone, in a minute he had reached the edge of the thicket, followed as quickly by Pierce Browning, Harry Waters and several others.

But the thicket was not to be so readily traversed. The intertwining fibers of grape-vines, and the thorny and whip-like stems of blackberry and raspberry bushes, hindered any rapid progress; though Will hastily drew a knife and cut his way through these annoying obstructions.

"Spread to the right and left!" he shouted. "The thicket is not wide. You may surround it and catch this weasel in his hole. Quick, lads! Don't let the hound escape!"

The suggestion was instantly followed. Some ran in each direction along the banks of the creek, with intent to overlap the thicket, while others darted in various lines through its dense midst, following Will's example of cutting a passage through the hindering vines and thorn bushes.

The ladies were soon left almost alone, awaiting with intense anxiety the result of this rapid and impulsive search.

"Shoot the hound down, if you can't stop him otherwise!" yelled Pierce Browning, as he plunged into the bushes, breaking through all obstructions with his great weight, and trampling them under his feet as an elephant might have done in a similar situation.

Several minutes of intense expectancy followed. Those left on the archery ground could hear the shouts and trampings of the pursuers, and their frequent cries of advice or of encouragement to each other. And now a more interesting cry came from the heart of the thicket, in the stentorian tones of Pierce Browning.

"By Heaven, Will!" he cried, "but you are a fine

shot on a fly. You've carried off the honors of the day."

"How? Did I hit him?" screamed back Will's voice, from a little distance.

"Yes. He took your hat with his bullet, and you have taken his with your arrow. Here it is; with a good goose-feathered shaft plumb through it; and a tinge of red on the barb as if it had creased the hood's scalp."

"Keep it," returned Will. "That is my target, with a shot in the bull's-eye. The hat may lead to its owner. Drive on, boys! He may be in hiding somewhere."

The plunging sounds continued for several minutes more.

"Hey! Hey! Hoicks! Stole away! Stole away!" came from an old fox-hunter, who had skirted the thicket. "Yonder he goes, on horseback, and riding like Jehu! By the seven saints, he has given us the slip!"

Several others quickly gathered around him, their eyes fixed on the distant horseman, who was riding rapidly down a neighboring lane, having just leaped his horse over the low fence that skirted the field.

Almost at the same instant Will Wildfire broke from the thicket, followed a moment afterward by the huge form of Pierce Browning, who held aloft triumphantly the arrow-pierced hat which he had discovered.

"Whereaway?" cried Will, eagerly.

"Yonder." A dozen hands pointed to the fugitive horseman, now a full quarter of a mile away.

"He has given us the slip, confound him!" exclaimed Pierce, in accents of vexation.

"Not yet," was Will's hasty answer.

He trode quickly from the throng and ran across the field, first snatching a bow from the hands of one of the pursuers, who had brought this implement with him.

All eyes curiously followed the athletic youth, not comprehending his object. It was soon evident, however. A young, clean-limbed horse was quietly cropping the grass on the other side of the field.

Will slackened his pace as he approached this animal, who was lifting his ears in incipient alarm.

But by that sort of freemasonry which exists between some men and the members of the brute creation, Will managed to quiet the alarm of the skittish animal. He was allowed to approach, to softly stroke the glossy hide, to grasp its flowing mane.

It was the opportunity he wanted. In a moment more, with an agile spring, he had flung himself astride the trusting animal.

A quiver of the horse's flanks, succeeded by a sudden and powerful leap, followed this treacherous movement. But Will sat his barebacked steed like a Centaur.

"Take down the bars!" he cried, as the horse continued its frantic efforts to get rid of this unwelcome burden. "I will run down that villain, if it is in the creature's limbs and muscles."

"As he spoke, with a dextrous movement, he inserted the string of the bow which he held, between the animal's gaping jaws, and drew it tight until it almost cut into the flesh.

"There is your archer's bit and bridle!" he shouted. "Down with the bars, some of you! I have enough to do to handle this horse, without trying to leap him."

Some ran to obey his bidding, while Will struggled with the frightened and infuriated young animal, who was making frantic efforts to throw his daring rider.

It was in vain. Wherever Will had learned the art of horsemanship he had learned it thoroughly. The animal bucked, reared, almost stood on its head, yet Will, grasping his side with a steel-like grip of his knees sat firm, punishing the maddened steed severely with his improvised bit.

"All ready," came the cry.

"Then make way, for I am coming!"

The furious animal, by this time, had ceased its wild gyrations and was trembling like a leaf. Its next movement was to spring forward with marvelous speed, straight toward the fence.

But its skillful rider directed the unbroken and unsaddled creature to the opening made by his friends. In an instant more they were in the open lane.

"I will run him down, if there is any virtue in horseflesh," he cried. "And if I do, let him look to himself. He shall find that Will Wildfire is not to be shot at with impunity."

Like an arrow down the lane darted the furious animal, guided by the improvised bridle of his daring rider, who sat the horse as if part of himself, while his compressed lips and gleaming eyes showed that there was deadly earnest in his expedition.

CHAPTER III.

FARMER BROWN GIVES AN INVITATION TO SUPPER.

PHINEAS BROWN, farmer, was slowly wending his way back from market, where he had disposed of a load of turnips and carrots, and the week's butter of the Brook Farm dairy. He sat back now in his creaking vehicle, happy in the double consciousness of having done his duty to his fellows by making the primest butter of the county, and his duty to himself by getting the primest price for it.

The old roan horse, which had been a quarter of a century in the family, trotted along with that grave deliberation to which he felt that his venerable age and faithful service gave him the right. And his wrinkled but kindly-faced driver seemed quite content with the slow pace of the old horse.

"But hadn't thee best gee up a bit, Franky?" he quietly said to the animal. "Thee knows it will be night before thee gets to thy crib, at that pace."

The horse pricked up his ears at these words, as

though he understood them, and stepped out at a somewhat brisker speed.

Phineas Brown pulled a note book from the pocket of his snuff-colored coat, and began leisurely to examine its entries, a look of great satisfaction coming upon his face.

"Add six, that makes nine," he muttered with pursed-up lips, and compressed brows. "Nine times forty is—let me see. Nine times naught is naught, nine times four is thirty-six. Three hundred and sixty. Then add to that seven twenty-nine, and we have—" he put the end of the pencil in his mouth, and looked up, as he tried to mentally make the difficult calculation.

But all thought of figures and profits was suddenly driven from his head, as his eyes glanced down the road before him. For there came a furious rider on a furious steed. And the rider was bareheaded, and the steed barebacked; while the experienced eyes of the old farmer had never seen a bridle like that with which the horse was managed.

His wonder increased as the equestrian came nearer; while a look that was not entirely astonishment came upon his dry visage.

"Unless I am strangely mistaken I have seen that steed before," he muttered, with a queer expression. "Nor is the visage of the rider quite unknown to me. But what is the untamed colt bridled with?"

A minute afterward Will Wildfire, for it was he, thundered up beside the wagon of the old farmer. Wild as the horse had been at first, his breakneck drive seemed to have taken the spirit out of him. Will readily drew him up with his improvised bit.

The flash was still in his eyes as he turned to the old man, who sat with a peculiar grim smile on his features while he adjusted his spectacles for a closer look at the horse.

"Excuse me for stopping you, Mr. Brown," began Will, with rapid and eager voice. "Have you met a bareheaded rider, driving furiously down the road by which you have come?"

"Yes," replied the old farmer, as he continued to inspect Will's strange mount.

"Where?" cried the young man with impatient haste. "He's a villain and an attempted murderer! How far is he in advance?"

"Pardon me, friend Wildfire," the old fellow deliberately answered. "I do not quite agree with thee in thy opinion. Thyself is the only furious bareheaded rider I have met to-day."

Will put his hand to his head with an involuntary gesture. He had forgotten the loss of his hat.

"Do not trifle with me," he cried, half angrily. "Have you not met him? I must overtake him."

"Thee will scarcely do so on thy present course," gravely returned the old Quaker. "I assure thee I have met with no such character."

"Then he must have turned off into some side road," remarked Will, preparing to wheel his foaming horse.

"One moment, friend Wildfire," said the old man. "I would like to address thee a brief query."

Will paused impatiently.

"I hope you will not detain me."

"Excuse me; but will thee tell me where thou obtained thy steed?"

"Borrowed it," Will briefly replied.

"And is thy bridle a new invention? The patter is strange to me."

Will laughed grimly.

"We were having an archery match," he explained. "I suddenly found it necessary to borrow a horse; and as no saddle or bridle was at hand, I was forced to improvise the one out of the animal's hide, and the other out of a bow-string."

"I hardly like the pattern, friend Wildfire," was the quiet answer. "The poor creature's mouth is bleeding."

"I had to break in the hard-mouthed brute," said Will apologetically.

"Well, well, my young friend, thee will forgive my curiosity, I hope," begged the old farmer. "Thee will understand it better when I explain that thou art riding my horse, and I do not remember the fact of thy borrowing it."

"Your horse? The devil!" cried Will, hastily.

"No, no. I do not perceive that his Satanic majesty has aught to do with the affair. Though I would not have believed anybody but he could have ridden that horse barebacked."

"I have a touch of the devil in me to-day," announced Will. "You must excuse my appropriating your horse. I know you will, when I explain."

He quickly recounted the circumstance which had driven him to his hasty action, the old man listening with wonder and sympathy.

"Why, why! certainly, certainly! under such circumstances thou art thrice welcome to him."

"And now I must continue my pursuit, if it is possible to discover what road the fugitive has taken."

"It is not possible," remarked the farmer. "There is a net-work of lanes back here. Thee would waste thy time. Besides, I don't think I can lend thee that horse any longer to-day. The creature has had enough of thy rough handling. Thee had better return and take supper with me."

There was a sort of stupefaction in the look which Will cast on the old man's grim face.

"But—you are too kind," he faltered. "After my running away with your horse?"

"Do not think of that, friend Wildfire," returned farmer Brown, with a lurking smile. "I had intended to send for a professional horse-breaker to-morrow, to break that colt to the bridle. Thee has saved me that trouble and expense. Therefore I certainly owe thee in return an invitation to supper."

An odd look passed across Will's expressive face. He seemed with difficulty to repress a laugh.

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

"I can scarcely come," he answered. "Unless you will permit me to extend the invitation to a few friends, whom I left at the archery grounds."

The old farmer hesitated a moment, his brows knitting.

"Yes, yes! certainly, certainly!" he then exclaimed. "Bring thy friends. I shall be happy to see them.—Gee up, Franky," and he shook the reins over the subdued old roan.

Will turned his horse at the same time, and started swiftly back.

"Look for me, by sunset" he called back, as his new-broken steed ran at a rapid pace down the smooth road.

"Well, if this isn't the most astonishing adventure of all!" he ejaculated. "Old Brown is said never to have given an invitation to a meal in his life. For fear he may never give another I am half inclined to make the most of this."

A laugh broke from his lips, at the thought that was passing through his mind.

Meanwhile farmer Brown jogged on, reaching home in due time.

While his eldest son took charge of the horse and wagon, leading them to the barn, the old man made his way to the kitchen, where he found his good wife, as wrinkled as himself, busily engaged at her culinary preparations.

The old man seated himself quietly in his accustomed chair, laid off his broad-brimmed hat, wiped his brow with an immense silk handkerchief, and then slowly prepared to respond to the dozen questions which the good dame had already asked him.

"Wife," he asked. "What has thee for supper?"

"What a question, Phineas," was her surprised answer. "Thee knows well there is only the sausage, the tea, and a loaf or two from yesterday's baking."

"We might open some preserves," he reflected.

"And—and—"

He paused in doubt. "What does thee ever mean, in the world, husband?"

"I have invited some company to supper, Rebecca."

Mrs. Brown was on the point of speaking again. But at this unlooked-for information she fell back in a chair, holding up her hands in a very picture of perfect astoundment.

"Well, I never!" were the only words that came from her lips.

"Only a few friends," continued the old man, more briskly. "And—and—does thee not think, wife, it would be well to have some poultry?"

"What ever made thee do it, Phineas Brown? And me with nothing whatever in the house! As for the poultry, why they are all cooped up for the market. All that are eatable, I mean."

"I was thinking of killing the old goose, Rebecca."

"The old goose!" The good wife's hands went up again, in utter horror.

"Yes. She is too old for market. But these are hearty young folks, with good teeth and strong jaws. I think they might masticate her."

"For mercy's sake, Phineas Brown, do not think of such a thing! Why, thee will be the talk of the country's side."

"Rebecca," replied the old man, with a grim smile, "it might be well to have the laugh on my side. These young men have played something like a trick on me to-day. Not that I blame them so much under the circumstances. But, I'd like them to see that old Brown understands the color of a joke."

He proceeded to relate what had occurred, his wife listening in wonder, while her busy hands added sundry additions to the preparations for the evening meal.

"How many of these guests did thee invite, Phineas?" she asked, after her astonished comments on his tidings.

"I cannot answer exactly. A few, Mr. Wildfire said."

"That is just like thee, Phineas. How am I ever to know how many to prepare for?" asked the vexed woman.

"Never fear, Rebecca," replied Phineas, with his grim smile. "The goose will be enough for all, there is no fear of that."

A dry laugh shook his old sides, as he went out in search of the doomed patriarch.

An hour after this conversation the table was set in the dining-room of Brook Farm. It had been drawn out to an unusual length, by the addition of other tables, and contained a goodly display of Mrs. Brown's cherished silver and chinaware. Otherwise it was not greatly encumbered; some plates heaped with broad slices of her famous white bread, a slim display of fried sausage, and a glass dish well-filled with some of her choice preserves, and flanked with another dish of cake, cut in very thin slices, made up the main ingredients of the meal.

But in the center of the board sat a great closed dish, with an appetizing steam oozing from under its cover. It held out a most pleasant promise to the sense of smell, and only farmer Brown and his wife knew that it contained the stewed fragments of the patriarchal goose, of whose age, like that of some old men and women, there was no definite record.

"Are they going to disappoint us after all?" asked Mrs. Brown, uneasily.

"I hope not," remarked her husband. "No, Rebecca; there is some one coming up the lane now. I wish I had asked neighbor Wildfire how many friends he was going to bring. Not more than two or three I sincerely hope."

Steps were at this moment heard in the porch. An instant after Will Wildfire entered the room, followed by Pierce Browning, Harry Waters, and— But they filed in faster than we could name them, a crowd of young men and young ladies, before the astound-

ed eyes of the farmer and his wife, until more than twenty-five were in the room.

"I have brought my friends from the archery meeting, in response to your kind invitation," said Will, gravely.

"Thank Heaven I cooked the old goose!" the farmer mentally remarked, as the room grew thronged. "We will see who has the best of the joke."

CHAPTER IV.

A ROLAND FOR AN OLIVER.

At the same moment that farmer Brown and his good wife retreated in horror from the avalanche of gay young men and pretty girls, who had invaded their quiet domicile, a party of very different aspect was preparing to move in the same direction, from substantial farm-house several miles to the west.

This party was composed of three substantial members of the Society of Friends, dressed in the most sober drab, of the most antiquated cut, and with an expression of abhorrence of the good things of this life, that would have done credit to the most rigid of the early Quakers.

Two of these were the proprietors of the house, Samuel and Harriet Wilberforce. The third was a traveling preacher of the society, Abraham Jenkins, a noted exhorter in Friends' meeting.

Withal they were three of the most rigid members of the society in that locality, manifesting a holy horror of the innovations, and backslidings into the world's ways, to which the younger members were becoming prone.

"It is sad, sad," remarked Abraham, with a solemn uplifting of his eyebrows. "I marvel me much that a judgment does not fall on these degenerate young people. But there are surely some of our friends, in this region, who cling to the faith of their forefathers?"

"Yes, verily," replied Samuel. "There is Phineas Brown, who is a worthy member of the fold."

"And his good wife, Rebecca," supplied Harriet, "a most earnest and solemn worker in the vineyard."

"Heaven be praised!" rejoined Abraham fervently. "The old flock shall not die out while but a few remain, with faith to abhor the vanities of dress, and the deceitful pleasures of the table, and above all the twanging abominations which the world's people call instruments of music. If thee do not object, friend Samuel and Harriet, I should abundantly enjoy a social visit to friend Phineas and Rebecca."

"Truly, friend Abraham, we will go thither without delay. Our good neighbor will be highly refreshed in spirit by a visit from thee. We shall find him and his good wife plunged in the charms of rational conversation, for they have a pious abhorrence of all frivolity, and indulgence in the vain delights of life."

A half-hour afterward found the three solemn friends jogging along solemnly behind the solemnest of horses, while the old wagon creaked beneath their substantial weight, as if its rheumatic joints were about to give way under their unwonted burden.

It was long after dark when they approached Brook Farm, and caught a moonlight glimpse of the chimneys of farmer Brown's substantial residence.

Step by step the old horse came nearer. But what was this? The solemn silence which they expected to hear was broken by the most unwonted sounds. Surely those were the tones of that abomination which the world's people call musical instruments, and moreover of that abomination of abominations named a fiddle! Could it be possible? And mingled with it were youthful voices raised in song and laughter, and—could it be?—yes, it was—the sound of feet engaged in the frivolity of dancing!

The shades of night prevented the three visitors from perceiving the horror which clothed each lengthened face. Their hands were raised in speechless dismay, while a mutual groan broke from their astounded lips.

"Has Satan escaped from his chains at last?" queried Abraham. "Verily, we have set our hands to the plow, and must not turn back. Some demon, surely, has entered into our unhappy friends' domicile."

With growing horror they descended from the vehicle, and approached, with hesitating steps, the spot desecrated by the unholy squeak of the fiddle.

It led them away from the house, and toward the great barn, whose large hall was now brightly illuminated, while it resounded with the sounds of laughter, music, and the quick tread of dancing feet.

But with the reader's permission, we will return to the supper-room of Brook Farm, into which the whole archery club, with their bows and arrows, had intruded at the close of our last chapter.

Some anxious moments had passed since then. But farmer Brown, who was a good fellow at heart, despite his rough exterior, and who knew how to appreciate a joke, soon recovered from his first astonishment, and accepted the situation with the best grace possible.

And Mrs. Brown, who loved young company much more than her austere husband, was secretly glad to behold this lively irruption, though her soul was troubled by the sparse aspect of her table.

"Thee will excuse me, friend Wildfire," remarked the old man, with his peculiar grim smile, "but is this what thee denominates a few friends?"

"Why, they would come," explained Will, in a tone of apology. "I told them you would not prepare for an army, but they were so anxious to call on neighbor Brewns that they were prepared to take pot luck!"

"Oh! they are welcome! These are all welcome!" cried the old fellow, grimly smiling, as he shook

hands with such as he recognized in the throng, while his motherly wife was already kissing and welcoming her friends among the ladies.

"But thee will have to take the will for the deed," she remarked. "We did not provide for so many."

"Pot luck, Mrs. Brown. Pot luck, you know, is all we expect," explained Will.

"And that is just what thee will get," remarked the farmer ironically. "Sit down, pray sit down, friends; I think thee will find we have enough for all. And perhaps there may be some fragments to spare."

Will caught a peculiar dry humor in the old man's tone, and began to fear that there might be some hidden counterplot to his joke.

But as for sitting down, that was simply impossible. Chairs enough were found to seat the ladies, but the gentlemen were obliged to stand, in a long solemn line, around the room.

"We have no great variety, ladies and gentlemen," remarked the farmer; "but good bread and butter, and stewed goose, are not to be despised."

And he removed the cover from the smoking dish, whose appetizing odors were giving pleasant anticipations to the hungry throng of self-invited guests.

"The gentlemen first," said Phineas, dryly, as he dished up the fragments of the patriarch. "As they are obliged to stand, they should be first served."

While Mrs. Brown poured out tea for the ladies, her husband, with his wrinkled face marked by a dangerous smile, passed plates of the steaming viand to the hungry line ranged expectantly around the wall.

And then the rattle of knife and fork began, that exhilarating music of the table to which the song of the tea-kettle so cheerfully responds.

"Will thee have a wing?"—A slice of the breast, did thee say?" and the old man approached the bottom of the rapidly declining dish, while the ladies looked on in silent apprehension that the goose would be exhausted before it came to their turn.

But an odd smile marked Mrs. Brown's genial face, as she watched the efforts of her guests to carve their meat. It was impossible to do it standing, and the most of them, with spread handkerchiefs, and plates on knees, were vigorously and unsuccessfully striving to get a morsel of meat off the thinly-covered bones of the old goose.

"Don't wait for me, friends," remarked the old man, as he still dipped into the dish. "Proceed with thy supper. Ladies, I fear thee will have to make thy meal on bread and butter. Thy gentlemen friends have exhausted the goose."

But the ladies by this time had caught scent of the joke, and were watching with furtive smiles the desperate but futile efforts of the gentlemen to get a morsel of meat from the bones of the venerable old bird. The dull knives they had might as well have attempted to carve sole-leather, and a look of despair, followed by a slowly growing smile, marked their faces, as they glanced furtively around the busily engaged circle.

Meanwhile the old farmer kept up his cheering remarks.

"I hope thee are enjoying thy supper, friends. Don't wait for the young ladies. They prefer tea and bread and butter. I am sorry I can't help thee to another piece, friend Wildfire. The wing is always tough, thee knows."

It was impossible to hold in any longer. The first explosion came from the ladies, who burst into a peal of laughter, that made the rooms of the old house thrill with an unwonted sound.

The merriment was echoed by the gentlemen, and a roll of laughter passed round the walls of the room like the rattle of musketry.

But the old farmer changed not a muscle of his face. With the same dry, grim smile, he continued to congratulate them on the good supper he had provided.

"And plenty for all, friends. Plenty for all. Do not stint thyselfs, I pray thee. Thee will find I have prepared amply."

The shouts of laughter redoubled, the ladies, particularly, laughing until the tears ran from their eyes.

"Sold, by Jupiter!" groaned Will to Pierce Browning. "I don't relish this, my boy. Cannot we provide him a Roland for the Oliver?"

"I have it," cried Pierce, suddenly. "I fancy we can manage to turn the tables. Wait till I return."

He slipped quietly from the room. Meanwhile the fun grew fast and furious. Brook Farm never, surely, had heard such sounds within its solemn precincts before. One by one the younger members of the Brown family inserted their astounded heads in at the door, and, seeing the quiet merriment on the faces of their austere parents, were borne away on the gust of laughter, though without the most remote idea what it all meant. Such profane mirth was something quite beyond the experience of the younger Browns.

Meanwhile the good lady of the house was diligently supplying her lady guests with slices of her famous bread, and cuts of her golden butter, and generously covering saucers of her choice strawberry preserves with the rich yellow cream of the Brook Farm dairy.

"Perhaps our gentleman friends would also like some bread and butter?" remarked the dry master of ceremonies. "Unless they are already fully satisfied with poultry."

"Why, I am afraid we have lost our relish for goose," replied Will. "But we might possibly have some remnant of appetite for bread and butter."

"Certainly, certainly!" cried the old man, in a genial tone. "And there is some sausage left also. I hope thee will find thy appetites abundantly satisfied, friends." He vigorously set to work to supply his hungry guests with the only eatable part of

repast, feeling, perhaps, that the goose joke had been carried quite far enough.

A half-hour passed, and the table was swept as clear of viands as though a hurricane had blown across it.

And now from the porch outside a most unexpected and astounding sound flowed inward. The old farmer lifted his ears in deep surprise. It was surely a fiddle, a violin, the twanging strings of Satan's harp of sin?

But his guests received the sound with far different emotions. There were clapping of hands and cries of joy.

"A fiddle! a fiddle!" cried some enthusiastic voices. "Good! good! We will have a dance! You can't object, Mr. Brown? There is your great barn floor. It is just the place."

"No, no!" faltered the horror-stricken old Quaker.

"Yes, yes!" laughed a dozen young voices, as Pierce Browning marched into the room, followed by a young man who was diligently extracting a lively hornpipe from the sounding strings of his instrument.

"Say we may, Mrs. Brown?" pleaded Miss Darling, her blue eyes dancing. "We will not dance in the house. But in your barn, there can be no harm in a little fun there."

"This is your doing," groaned the old man aside to Will Wildfire.

"A violin for a goose!" laughed Will, in response. "One joke is worth another, neighbor Brown, though I am not responsible for this."

But there is some marvelous magic in the sound of music. The hearts of the old folks, which had been dry in their bosoms to the pleading of sweet sounds, were now dancing, despite themselves. And as the player changed from his lively hornpipe to a slower and more plaintive air, they felt the flood-gates of their souls breaking up, while an unwanted moisture filled the corners of their eyes.

As for their children, to whom such sounds were almost or quite unknown, they had already fallen into an involuntary dance, while their young faces were irradiated with joy.

"Well, well, well, thee has taken me by storm!" cried the old man. "But what will the neighbors say?"

"Let them say what they please," returned Pierce. "We will warm up their dry hearts, too, if they show themselves here."

And now there was preparing in hot haste. And the long wide floor of the barn was swept clean, and lighted by candles and lamps variously placed, while the fiddler, mounted on a chair which was placed upon a barrel, was rattling off the liveliest music from his vibrating strings, till the floor sprung like a living thing beneath the feet of the dancers, and laughter and gay voices sounded out every nook and cranny in the wide expanse.

But farmer Brown and his wife kept sternly away from this frivolity, at first. Yet they could not avoid the thrilling charm of music. Step by step they came nearer. Music, mirth, and joy, surely there could be no so great sin in these? In time they appeared at the open doors of the inclosure, looking in with an enforced effort at gravity.

But they were seen, and in a moment were caught up and drawn into the whirl of a lively country-dance. Will Wildfire caught the old lady's hands and drew her gayly in, while Miss Darling, her eyes sparkling with mischief, did the same for the wrinkled old farmer.

They hardly knew it they were swinging and swining across the floor, with a youthful vigor of which they would not have believed themselves capable. And the music pealed, and the well-timed clatter of feet resounded, and light laughter came from merry lips, and bright eyes flashed and sparkled, and young faces grew radiant with delight, while the old man and his wife felt themselves young again, as they were drawn away in the intoxication of the dance, quite forgetful of where they were and what they were doing in that moment of wild forgetfulness.

Suddenly the violin ceased, and the lively dancers came to an involuntary pause. And, from the open door sounded in deep and solemn tones:

"Truly Satan has broken his chains, and the demon of madness has entered into the brains of our brothers and our sisters. But oh! that our eyes should have been forced to behold it, and our ears to hearken unto it!"

All eyes were directed thither. What was farmer Brown's horror to behold his two rigid Quaker neighbors, Samuel and Harriet Wilberforce, with a still more solemn stranger, gazing with a look of horrified astonishment, at the sinful indulgence of himself and wife in the terrible frivolity of the dance!

CHAPTER V.

A CAMP DINNER.

The well-wooded banks of Carbon Creek, that winds in leisurely curves down from the Pennsylvania coal-bearing mountains, presented an unusual spectacle on the day to which our story now leads us forward. A forest of well-grown oaks lined its banks, with here and there broad vistas leading back to the mountain flanks, while occasionally the view was broken by dense clusters of thick growing underbrush.

At the spot in question a sharp curve in the stream inclosed a peninsula of several acres in extent, whose grassy level was clear of trees, with the exception of one huge poplar that occupied its center, and threw its wide shade to the borders of the inclosure. Beneath the mighty limbs of this great patriarch of the forest, a brace of tents lifted their white cones. On the grass surrounding them was spread a variety of house-keeping implements, while

close to the trunk of the poplar, a crackling fire burned under a steaming iron pot, which was swung on a cross-piece of wood, supported by two improvised tripods.

On the grass around the forms of a half-dozen young men were indolently stretched, idly awaiting the completion of the culinary process, to which one of their number occasionally gave his attention. They were dressed for the woods, in blue flannel shirts and stout belted pantaloons, while high boots and wide-rimmed, low-crowned hats completed their attire.

"Come, old horse, the morning is sliding by like a Dutchman upon a raft. Stir up that mysterious stew of yours, or we'll not get an ounce of sport to-day," exclaimed one of the idle loungers.

"No good cook hurries his broth; don't you know that, my hungry friend?" replied the cook, as he stirred up the contents of the pot with a huge wooden ladle. "What's more, I sent that imp of Satan out, ten minutes ago, for some more wood. The young hound must have found a squirrel's nest, or a chestnut tree; for there's more wood than wood, with him."

"Have you looked up your snares to-day yet, Ben?" asked another. "A dish of fried rabbit wouldn't be a bad flanker to Jack's hodge-podge stew."

"I told Pete to take a squint," replied Ben, lazily rolling into an easier position. "Maybe that's what's keeping him."

"The flends you did!" growled Jack, angrily flourishing his wooden ladle. "It's no wonder that my stew is suffering for firewood, if the boy is smelling out your snares. Suppose you nose your own rabbits?"

"Oh, dry up; here's the boy now!" cried Ben Huntly, pointing to the edge of the woods.

"And with rabbits and fagots both," added Will Wildfire, who formed another of the party.

"And a comical-looking little sinner he is," commented Pierce Browning, with a laugh.

It was, indeed, an amusing spectacle which, that moment, emerged from the woods and came slowly toward the camp. For there appeared a little negro, about two-thirds grown, and so black that charcoal would certainly have made a white mark on him, while his eyes—that rolled like balls of ivory in a basin of ink—formed the only relief to his midnight complexion.

On each shoulder he firmly clasped a fagot of dry branches, which he had gathered from under the trees in the wood. But the comical feature of his aspect was the fact that he had clutched between his gleaming teeth the hind legs of two rabbits, which hung down in a limp manner over his breast.

"Well, may I be kicked by a mule!" ejaculated Ben, springing to his feet, "if that isn't an original way to carry rabbits! Why, you black jackanapes, what in the blue blazes do you mean, to stick my rabbits in your mouth, hey?"

Pete attempted to say something, but only sputtered out an unintelligible answer; while the others were rolling with laughter at the sudden wrath of Ben and the funny consternation of the boy.

He at length opened his mouth and let the rabbits fall; but he was no more able to speak than before, for he was quite choked with rabbit fur, which half filled his mouth and throat.

Sputtering and coughing, the boy dropped the fagots from his shoulders, and hopped about as though he were dancing on hot plates, while he endeavored to extract the choking fur from his mouth. "Dar's yer ole wood!" he managed to ejaculate, at intervals. "An' dar's yer ole rabbits! Guess it didn't hurt 'em much to cram dere hind paws in my mouth. Don't cook dat part ob de rabbit, nohow."

And Pete continued to dance his war-dance, while he clawed away at the hidden recesses within his wide jaws.

"Guess mebbe you'd laugh t'other side yer moufs, ef you'd got yer jaws full of rabbit's wool!" exclaimed the boy, indignantly. "Wish to gracious I'd luff de ole t'lings in de trap! Sure's you lib, I do."

While the others continued to chaff Pete, the cook had replenished his fire, which now burned briskly, and he was skillfully skinning one of the rabbits, and preparing it for the frying-pan.

"Roll up here, now!" he called out, after twenty minutes more had elapsed. "Spread your table-cloth, and get out your best silver, for I can tell by the simmer that the stew is reaching its critical point. Stir up, there, you lazy tramps!"

The table-cloth consisted of a sheet of oil-cloth, spread on an improvised board table; and the silver, of certain delf dishes, that looked as if they had gone through three campaigns in the grand army, though they had really done less than a week's service in outdoor housekeeping.

But to their eager appetites, broken delf was as good as polished plate, when smoking with the appetizing compound which Jack Hasard served up in generous portions, and flanked with a side-dish, full of the redolent odor of fried rabbit.

The woodland meal progressed rapidly. They had taken a morning's brisk exercise, and were hungry enough to have eaten sole-leather, if nothing better offered.

"Talk about camp life!" muttered Harry Waters, who formed one of the party, "just compare this provender with farmer Brown's old goose, and bless your lucky stars."

A hearty laugh arose at the recollection.

"You should thank the old fellow for giving you the chance to sharpen your teeth on that perambulatory whetstone," remarked Pierce.

"I had the wing for my share," rejoined Will, "and I can testify to one thing. If that old bird had set out to fly to the moon, she would have got there, if it depended on her toughness of wing. She would

never have given way in that point of her domestic economy."

"A rich trick the old chap played upon you," remarked Ben, as he inserted his fork into a juicy slice of the rabbit. "Thank my stars I kept clear of that sell."

"Good heavens! didn't we pay him back in richer coin than his own?" ejaculated Pierce. "As long as I live I never expect to see such another picture of consternation, as there was when his Quaker friends caught the old chap and his wife footloose over the barn floor, as if they had got an infusion of quicksilver in their old bones. Their faces were enough. Anybody that could draw their picture at that moment, would have a sure fortune in it."

"And what was the end of it all?" asked Ben.

"Oh! we tried to cook the new-comers in the same porridge, but that didn't work. Then we decamped, bows, arrows, fiddle and all, and left the old rogue to match the goose against the fiddle, and see who had the best of it."

"But afterward, I mean? What was the upshot of the business? Has friend Brown been read out of meeting? Or have they set him to do some heavy penance, for the crime of shaking his old foot in a dance?"

"No. You would hardly believe it, but the old man has put his foot square down in favor of music," supplied Will. "He vows now that nobody but a dried up fossil could see any harm in listening to sweet sounds: and, as for moving his feet before a fiddle, it is no more sin than to move them behind a plow. In short he is in full rebellion. They may read him out of meeting or not, but his old heart has been warmed by the sweet sound of a tune, and he is bent on not letting it dry up again."

"Good for him!" cried Ben. "There is nothing like sticking to sensible opinions."

They were now through with their repast, and one by one rose from the table, leaving Pete to attend to the dish-washing and cleaning up, while they caught up their lines, and started on a fishing excursion down the creek.

"And, mind, Pete, that you don't burst yourself with Irish stew and rabbit," warned Will, as he caught the little chap's eye fixed with greedy eagerness on the remnants of the feast.

"Can't say as I's berry hungry," returned Pete. "Not so mighty berry hungry, dat is. Only it's a shame to see good vittals go spilin'. Guess I'll put some ob it away. Want to git dat rabbit's wool out my t'roat, ye know."

A laugh followed Pete's reasons for his appetite, and the sportsmen turned down the creek, as the boy attacked the viands with all the ferocity of Napoleon's old guard assailing a hostile redout.

A brace of boats swung from the shore at the left of the encampment. These were already well provided with fishing tackle, shot-guns, and the other implements of woodland sport.

Dividing up the party between them, they loosened the chains that held them to the shore, and pushed out into the swift current of the creek, Will again shouting back to Pete:

"Mind you don't set foot out of the camp till we come back. Don't set the tents on fire. And don't let any of the stew go to waste."

"You kin jess bet I won't do dat, anyway," spluttered Pete, with a mouth full of the juicy food. "Not as I's so drefful sharp set, but I's not gwine to let good vittals go to waste. I's gwine to do my duty, ef I has to bu'st over it."

With a laugh from the sportsmen, the oars fell in the water, and the boats shot down-stream.

CHAPTER VI.

GUNNERS AND ANGLERS.

"This way, Ben. We will have to work around the marsh. You take it to the left, and feel your way carefully. The birds will be confounded skittish on an afternoon like this."

"All right," returned Ben, trailing his gun. "And keep an eye on that dog, Will. He's too eager. The villain is young, and hasn't been half broken."

"Come here, Sport," cried Will, in a tone of stern command, as the youthful dog showed an inclination to bound ahead. "Keep quiet, you rogue. Don't stir a hair till you get the word."

The intelligent animal understood enough of this harangue to take his post obediently at Will's heels, where he moved on docilely, with only an occasional outbreak to the right or left.

The point at which they now found themselves was an open reach of the forest, broken just here by a piece of marshy ground, of some width; while, further on, the trees lowered and grew thicker, a thin undergrowth covering the soil. Around this marsh the sportsmen briskly walked. The call of quail had been reported from the undergrowth that morning, and their pace decreased as they approached this part of the wood.

Will now permitted the young pointer to go in advance, though cautioning and restraining him in low tones of command.

"Gently, gently, Sport! Back here, you ingrate; you are too eager! Hang it all, what did they mean by sending us an untrained dog? Back, I say, or you will flush the partridges!"

The disaster which Will feared came to pass. The eager dog burst into a clump of bushes, and then suddenly, with the instinct of his race, dropped into a statuesque attitude, with outstretched, trembling tail, and extended neck, as firm and fixed as though he had been carved in bronze.

Unfortunately it was a flying flock that he pointed. That sudden whirr of wings, which is so trying to the nerves of an unpracticed sportsman, sounded from the bushes, and a dozen quail rose, out of good gunshot, sweeping with their wavy flight through the wood.

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

Will quickly raised his gun; but immediately lowered it again. There was no use to waste powder and shot.

"It would serve the hound right if I gave him a reminder," he angrily exclaimed, "yet the creature has good blood. He stands those bushes like a statue. A little experience may break him in to his work. Come here, Sport! You will have to be more wide-awake, if you want to keep company with me."

The dog hung his ears, and slunk back. The instinct of generations of breeding told him that he had done wrong. It is utterly surprising how much a blooded animal owes to birth and how little, in comparison, to training. The habits of ancestors display themselves, as it were, in the egg.

Five minutes elapsed, when a gun-shot sounded from the left. Ben was at it. A minute more and the partridges swept back, directly toward Will. Half hid behind a tree, he waited with eager impatience, his gun at the shoulder and his eye fixed keenly on the coming birds.

"Down! Down, Sport!" he cautioned, as the dog manifested signs of uneasiness.

But it was too late. The birds had seen the moving animal. A quick whirl, and they were away at a wide angle, followed by a snap shot from Will, at a most unpromising distance.

"Hang the uneasy dog, and my impatience!" he cried. "That's a sheer waste of powder and shot. It was impossible to touch a feather at that distance; and I should not blame the dog, when I cannot control myself."

He trudged on, in an ill-humor with himself and his dog, making slowly toward the point to which the birds had directed their flight.

Meanwhile, in the creek, which lay a half-mile to the right, the boats swung at anchor just out of the channel, in a most attractive reach of the beautiful stream. Here the wood, which, just above, clasped the current in its shad embrace, stood somewhat back, leaving a narrow green opening, covered with thick clusters of blooming golden-rod, while luxuriant ferns fringed the edge of the liquid current. Through this opening a flood of warm sunlight poured upon the stream, glinting from its ruffled surface, and producing a condition most likely to be attractive to fish.

In this sunny reach the two boats were moored, their inmates engaged in that laziest of all sports, rod and cork angling.

"By Jove, I thought we would haul up fish here in a steady stream!" exclaimed Pierce Browning, extending his heavy weight in the bow of one of the boats. "And here's a good half-hour without a nibble."

"The fish take pity on you. They are too polite to disturb you," said Harry Waters, as he drew up a large sunfish.

"Throw it overboard again, my boy. We don't want to rob the river of such game as that. What luck are you having down there?"

"Not worth shucks," came from the other boat. "There are no fish here. I move we hoist anchor and float lower down-stream."

"What's the use?" returned Pierce, lazily. "We wouldn't be away from here five minutes before it would swarm with fish, and all the rest of the creek be deserted. They are too confounded cunning. Hallo! there go the boys. They have got the start of us."

This exclamation was called forth by two successive gun-shots, which sounded from a distant part of the forest.

"They have both got a shot in," remarked Harry. "You can notice the difference in the bark of their guns. Wake up there, Pierce! You've got a famous bite! Your cork's gone, and he's running away with the line!"

Pierce, at this admonition, quickly straightened himself, and grasped his rod, which had come near following the line overboard.

"Play him, lad! Play him!" cried Harry, eagerly. "Tenderly, tenderly. That's no fool of a fish, and won't stand rough treatment."

"Is that all you know about perch-fishing?" retorted Pierce, as he swept the line around the bow of the boat, the fish having gone under. "We can't play with these yellow beauties as though they were trout."

"How do you know it is a perch?"

"I have felt their tug before," returned Pierce, bringing the line from the water with a powerful swing, though the slender rod bent half double.

"It's a regular shiner! A beauty of the first water!" exclaimed Harry, enthusiastically, as the fish hung dangling in the sunlight for an instant, ere it was landed into the boat.

"Less noise there!" came the growling tones of Jack Hasard, from the other boat. "Don't flatter yourself you've got all the game. There's a school of them, and they're beginning to bite like grasshoppers. Just cork up your bluster, or we won't land a fin!"

"And I don't think you will hold the fish by making them set speeches," retorted Harry. "There's none of them running for Congress. He's pretty as a picture, Pierce. Ha! It's my turn now!"

His cork was tripping on the ruffled water, there being just enough wind to raise a slight wave.

"It's the ripple," said Pierce, as Harry skillfully played his line.

"Not a bit of it. Ah! there it dips! That's no ripple, at any rate."

"Don't let up on him, or he'll slide from the hook," warned Pierce. "Bring him up on a run."

With a quick jerk Harry brought his line from the water, with a fish little smaller than that which Pierce had just landed.

The fish seemed to have come in a shoal, for the

inmates of the other boat were now on the alert, and had already caught a couple of smaller perch. For the next half-hour the sport continued active. There was no longer any idle lounging, but all the anglers were wide-awake, playing their lines, and drawing fish from the water with encouraging rapidity.

"If we don't have a glorious feast on fried perch to-night, there's no use talking," remarked Harry. "Why, they bite as if they'd been on half rations for a month."

"Bite? Where?" asked Jack Hasard. "I haven't had a nibble for five minutes. Have they slid again?"

"I've a notion they have," answered Pierce. "My cork is as steady as a bumboat in a calm. Ha! There drops another partridge!" as a shot broke the silence of the forest to their right.

In a minute more an extraordinary thrashing and rending came from a clump of underbrush, which lined the banks of the creek about a hundred yards below them. It sounded as if some large creature was forcibly tearing his way through it.

It was followed by the sudden appearance, on the edge of the creek, of a most unexpected object. There was a clear vista in this direction, which was, at that instant, filled by the graceful form of a large buck, with broad-branching antlers.

The animal stood sharply outlined against the western sky, drawn up in a heap, as it were, at sight of this unlooked-for obstacle, and presenting a magnificent profile. But the next instant it plunged into the flowing waters, with a nimble spring, that took it half across the creek.

"Up with the anchor! Let us go for it!" cried Harry Waters, eagerly.

"Go for it? You might as well go for the wind!" returned Pierce, with lazy contemptuousness. "He will be ashore before we could make ten strokes. See! there, he has touched the shallows now! A noble deer, I'll swear. Hang me, if I won't have a stalk for him to-morrow!"

The flight of the deer was followed by a slighter wrestling in the bushes, and Will's young pointer broke into sight on the creek bank, loudly giving tongue.

"Listen to that!" exclaimed Jack Hasard, in his growing tone. "There's your Wildfire pointer! Running a deer, with his nose in the air, and yelping like a mongrel pup! I doubt if Will has had much good out of that thoroughbred."

But we must return to our gunners, whom we left following up their covey of quail. Ben had already a brace of the birds in his game bag, but Will, as we are aware, had not brought down a feather.

He had now got round the upper end of the swamp. The undergrowth was somewhat thicker here, and it was necessary to proceed slowly and cautiously. The dog, also, seemed to have learned a lesson from previous experience, and coursed in advance of his master with watchful diligence.

"Ware, Sport! Ware, lad! There goes Ben's pop-gun again! Look out, lovely! There's quail in this bit of blue grass, I'll bet high on it."

As Will thus, in a low tone, encouraged the dog, the latter suddenly halted on the edge of the grassy reach. His body stiffened, his neck craned out, his tail straight and stiff as an iron bar, one fore-foot raised from the ground, the only sign of life being a slight quivering motion, he presented the beau ideal of a pointer. He had caught from sheer nature the duty demanded of him.

A few cautious steps, with gun at shoulder, from the huntsman, and the covey suddenly flushed. But Will was ready this time. "Crack! crack! went his two barrels in succession; and two of the noble birds, with a wild whirl, came crashing down to the ground.

"Bravo! Bravo, Sport!" exclaimed Will, patting the dog's neck. "Come! do as well as that every time, and we'll beat Ben Huntly's trained dog hollow. Never tell me there's nothing in blood!"

During the next half-hour he got in several more shots, and his game-bag began to grow heavy with its feathered and speckled freight.

For ten minutes now they went onward cautiously, without a shot, when Sport again pointed game. Will crept up and glanced between the animal's ears into the dense thicket ahead.

He caught sight of the bird which Sport had spotted, and brought his gun to his shoulder just as the quail took the alarm. The shot was at point-blank range, and almost along the ground, yet it failed to hit the bird. For at that instant a sudden commotion in the center of the thicket disconcerted the hunter's aim. The shot flew wild, toward the locality of the noise. It was followed by a peculiar cry, and the same thrashing sound that had been heard by the fisherman.

Instant after a stately buck broke from the thicket, tossing his antlers, and heading directly for the creek, followed by Sport in full cry.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HAUNTS OF THE DEER.

"My hound! Yes, there's not his match 'twixt river and river, if I do say it. Put him on the trail of the best buck that ever jumped, and it's all day with that buck. There's no discount on that."

The speaker was a lank, raw-boned, athletic fellow, with a skin like parchment, and dressed in leather breeches, which were stuffed into the toes of his slouching boots. A skull-cap, with an apology for a visor, covered his straggling hair, while a blue shirt, open at the throat, completed his attire.

"Come here, Tiger!" he called, in a tone of command. "Now, there's a dorg as is a dorg," he continued, as a huge but trim-built and thin-flanked

hound walked gravely up and inserted his nose into his master's open palm.

"As I said afore, the deer that flings him has got to be as lively as a cricket in harvest time, and just you lay your bets on that!"

"We want him then," said Harry Waters, to whom these remarks had been addressed. "You know where our camp is?"

"Yes; on the long bend of the Carbon," replied Joe Smith, the individual above mentioned, as he leaned his back against the public pump of the village of Coalville. "And so you flushed a buck there yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Just about where, say?"

"A couple of miles below camp. There's a piece of swamp to the left that you may know by."

"Know it? I know it as well as I know beefsteak from mutton chops. And the critter swum the creek?"

"Exactly. He made for the hilly ground to the right."

"Ah! Hum. That's good. Yes; I hope you may get him."

"When can we look for you over?"

"Me? Well, mebbe you'd best not look for me."

"But we want you, I say. You and your dog, Hang it, you'll be well paid for your trouble."

"Look here, young man," drawled the gaunt woodsmen. "There mought be other things in your life that you'll want without getting. You don't s'pose that a chay of my inches is to be had at every crook of your finger?"

"Isn't this your business?" asked Harry.

"Reckon it is."

"Then what is wrong? You have nothing against our party, I hope?"

"Your party mought be sugar and butter, for all I know to the opposite."

"Why do you object to hunting with us, then?"

"Cause we follow in this country the barber-shop rule, first come first served. I'm engaged a ready for that very buck. You're not the first as has seen him trottin' round these mountings; mind you that."

"There's a party out for him?"

"I was bespoke an hour ago."

"Who are they?"

"Oh! a pack of city greenhorns; first cousins to your crowd. The man that hired me called himself Mark Preston."

"The devil!" broke from Harry's lips.

"Don't look much like him; so fur as I've seen pictures of that there individual, was the phlegmatic reply of the woodsmen.

"No, no; I don't mean that. But—then we can't have your dog?"

"This dorg's engaged," returned Smith, pinching the ears of his favorite.

"Then, as you've pumped me to find where the deer lay, maybe you can recommend me to a dog?"

A grim smile curled the lips of the woodsman.

"I allers pump where I think water 'll come easy," he rejoined. "As fur a dorg, you ain't got a ghost of a chance if Tiger once gits on the scent of that beast. There's Jerry Prime, though, who hangs out in the frame shanty, to the left of the road, about half a mile toward your camp. He's got a consid'ble fair hound, which you mought go fur."

There were some odd thoughts in Harry's mind, as he trudged along the mountain road, toward Jerry Prime's shanty.

"Mark Preston, eh?" he said to himself. "What brings him here? There's a blind somewhere in this deer-hunt. Couldn't he find room in the United States, without settling down on the edge of our camp? Sure as shooting he has followed us; and there's deviltry afoot somewhere in that chap's game-bag. I'll have to post Will Wildfire, for he's the buck that our jail-bird is on the scent of."

Jerry Prime was engaged without difficulty. His dog was a young animal, and was not likely to have the experience of Joe Smith's veteran, but it was clean-limbed, alert, and intelligent, and Jerry swore that its equal did not exist between the two oceans. In this he had rather the best of Joe, who had limited himself to the two rivers. Jerry had lost one eye; but the other was like a corkscrew. He walked with a long, loose-jointed stride that forced Harry into a half trot to keep up with it. And the whole way to the camp was enlivened with stories of the hunting experience of the woodsmen, in which he certainly drew heavily on the long bow.

"Yes, I foched that b'ar a-standin'. It were in the old times, you know; fore folks got thick 'round here. My highest neighbor were on the West Branch, 'bout twenty mile, or thereaway. But if we hadn't folks, we had b'ar and catamount fur company. And, as I were sayin', when I drew a bead on that critter— Drat my eyes! what in the saint's name's that?"

This exclamation was accompanied by a loud barking from the dog, who retreated between his master's legs, as if he had seen a specter.

Harry looked quickly around at this interruption, to the bear story, and burst into a loud laugh as he observed the cause of it.

They were now near the camp, and were following a narrow path, fringed by a thick tangle of bushes. And in the center of these bushes, like an ebony picture in an emerald frame, had suddenly appeared a small face of midnight blackness. There was no portion of the body visible; only the sable countenance, whose rolling goggle eyes, thick lips, the gleaming teeth added to the effectiveness of the picture.

"It's a devil's imp, sure," exclaimed Jerry, half raising his rifle. "I've half a mind to probe them bushes with a bullet, to see if that's anything under."

"No, no!" cried Harry, hastily. "It's sound flesh and blood. Come here, Pete, you villain! What are you up to now?"

"Jess scoutin', to see who's a-comin'. Dat's all," rejoined Pete, emerging from the bushes, while the dog and his master took a step backward. "Dar's dinner on de oil-cloth, and two or three ob de folks out. Marse Will's away somewhar. De Lord knows whar."

"What is it?" asked Jerry, with a slight tremulousness still in his voice.

"Who? Pete? Why he's our man of all work. Pure blood, Jerry. African to the finger-tips. All right, boy. You can scout round for your master. We will keep our share of the dinner from spoiling."

There was a depressed look about the hound, as he followed Jerry into the camp. It seemed partly shame at his recent terror, and partly doubt as to whether the apparition was not really supernatural. Pete's decided color was something unusual in that locality. He was a species of game to which the hound had not been broken.

But it was certain that the start which Jerry had received had no effect upon his appetite. He did the duty of two good men at the woodland table, wiping his lips on rising, with an air of supreme satisfaction, like that of one who has approved himself amply a man.

Within the next half-hour they were on their way to the spot at which the deer had vanished. Will had not yet returned, and Jerry was not content to wait longer for him.

"Jist as like as two peas," he explained, "that that buck isn't half a mile from whar ye last sighted him. Thar's famous feedin' spot fur 'em jist that. I've brung down more'n one seven-tined critter in that very spot. Puddin' grass, I call it; fur the deer like it as much as humans love their toppin'-off arter dinner."

"How shall we manage, Jerry?" asked Pierce. "I'd give a cow for a shot at that buck. Do you know the mountain?"

"Do I know beans?" rejoined Jerry, with a show of being nettled. "Jist find me the spot, within ten miles from here, as big as the palm of your hand, whar I ain't set foot, and I'll sell it to you, the biggest bargain you ever made."

"I hardly think I will go into the real estate business hereaway," Pierce gravely replied.

"It's a bushy bit o' sile," continued Jerry. "Ther's four or five paths leadin' down. Between them it's precious brambly. I calculate to station you folks at the deer runs, while me and Nebby-Nebchudnezzar his name is, but I call him Nebby fur an easier mouthful—well, we'll scour the top. If that buck's thar we'll rouse him sure. If he aren't, we'll take a stretch over to Pilot Knob. That's the next likeliest place."

The hunters stationed, with ready rifles, and throbbing hearts in some of their breasts, Jerry and his dog disappeared up the hillside.

An anxious half-hour passed, with no sign of game, though an occasional yelp from the dog broke the silence. At the end of that time the scout reappeared, down the path watched by Pierce Browning. He gave at the same time a shrill whistle, the prearranged signal to the others.

"He's not thar," Jerry announced. "Ain't a mouse on that hill that Nebby hasn't started. Pilot Knob is to be our next holt."

"Where is it?"
"The risin' ground you see, off yander. It's a famous huntin' ground. I recollect onc't—let me see—about twenty-five or thereaway, years back; anyhow, afore this kentry thought of fillin' up. Why, you mought a-gone good twenty-five miles on a stretch, in any direction, and found nothin' but sky an' woods, deer an' b'ar; not a human to the square acre, as we's got it in these days. Well, as I war sayin'—"

"Whom did you find to talk to in those days?" interrupted Pierce.

"To my rifle and my dog. They both 'preciated me, you kin bet your level dollar on that."

But we must leave them on the wait for the arrival of the others, and cut short Jerry Prime's celebrated deer story, to look after another of our friends.

Will Wildfire had been two or three hours out, yielding to a restless feeling which would not permit him to stay in camp. He had taken his rifle, with the possibility of getting a shot at something larger than a partridge or a rabbit. But, for an hour or two, he had wandered aimlessly about, with little thought of game, his whole soul filled with the spirit of the woods, a dreaming sensation flooding him as he roamed under the shadows of aboriginal trees, and in the solemn silence of unbroken glens.

It was about three o'clock of the afternoon, when he found himself on the verge of a grassy valley, down which a brook came tumbling and singing, while the warm sunlight flowed into its inmost recesses, and kindled into beauty the crimson and gold of the autumn foliage.

Will seated himself on a knoll which commanded this scene, his eyes and heart full of warm admiration, as he looked upon what seemed to him an infusion of fairy-land into the heart of the primeval forest.

He sat thus for half an hour in complete silence, the rifle resting idly between his knees, and his eyes fixed in entranced delight upon this strangely beautiful woodland opening, with its lawn-like grass, and its glistening brook.

But now, on the slope opposite him, the form of a man appeared; a tall, gaunt figure, preceded by a huge hound, who was coursing slowly along, with his nose to the ground.

"The lads are at hand then," thought Will, as he recognized Joe Smith and his dog.

He was not aware of the fact that they had been forced to engage another aid.

The hunter passed on and disappeared. Ten minutes of silence followed, and then another figure appeared upon the scene. And it was one that sent a sudden thrill through Will's heart.

For, from the woods to his left, with a stately step and proud bearing, walked the graceful animal in search of whom so many huntsmen were abroad.

For a moment the buck stood, outlined against the sky, with uplifted head and thrown-back antlers, snuffing the air. Will could see his nostrils dilating, as though with suspicion. He half raised his rifle; but let it fall again.

"No, no," he muttered. "That would look too much like murder."

Now the buck, seemingly reassured, walked with an easy step down the grassy slope, and paused at the brook, where he bent his head, and eagerly lap-peled the grateful waters.

"I suppose I would be called a fool for my pains," said Will to himself, "but hang me, if I have the heart to shoot at that pretty creature, in his innocent security. He can go, if I never have a shot at a deer."

Will was now on his feet, looking down upon the buck, and fully revealed himself to eyes of which he did not dream, in the wood behind him.

Suddenly the animal raised its head. From a distance came the faint cry of a hound. It stood looking to right and left for an instant, then gathered its body together for the first spring of its flight.

The thought of its escape suddenly roused the hunter's spirit in Will. In a moment his rifle was at his shoulder, his eyes on the sights, his finger on the trigger.

The aim he took was as quick as lightning. He pressed the trigger—But at that same instant a sensation shot through his head as though it had been pierced with a hot iron. His rifle twitched nervously up, sending the useless bullet above the distant tree-tops. The weapon dropped from his hands. He staggered, half wheeled around, and fell prostrate and lifeless, while a double report broke on the air. The keen crack of his rifle was accompanied with that of another.

At the same instant the startled animal leaped, with a light bound, across the stream, and darted up the opposite slope, while the musical bay of the hound came in a louder strain down upon the rising wind.

But it was audible no longer to Will Wildfire's ear. The spring of the deer and the call of the hound were alike unseen and unheard by his vanished senses, locked as they were in a sleep like the sleep of death.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEER-STALKING.

It is an hour after the scene with which we closed our last chapter. At the further foot of Pilot Knob stand two men, the gigantic figure to the right being that of Pierce Browning, while to the left Jerry Prime, the one-eyed hunter, leans heavily upon his rifle.

"It's pretty much as I thought," remarked Jerry, with an odd wink of his sound eye. "Thar ain't a mite o' use tryin' to drive that buck past a deer run. I hadn't no 'jections to give you folks a trife of exercise; though it run all the time in my coat-sleeves that it war jist a waste o' muscle."

"What is to be done, then?" asked Pierce. "It is against the grain with me to go back empty-handed."

"Dumno as I hinted at sich a thing," retorted Jerry. "Hain't the least idear of sich backin' down as that. But, as I said afore, we can't run him down afoot, at the end of a dog's nose."

"How then?"

Jerry made no immediate reply. His gaze was fixed on the ground at his feet, which was covered with fallen leaves, the turf being only here and there visible. With the muzzle of his rifle he swept these leaves a little aside, and closely observed the ground beneath them.

"How are you fur bottom? I'm kinder afeard than's more weight than go 'bout you," asked Jerry, looking up.

"Me?" queried Pierce. "I'm the laziest fellow this side the Jerseys, when there's no game afoot. But set me on a good track, and I won't be the last to flinch."

"You're my man then," was Jerry's quick reply. "We've got to stalk that deer. Long's we flung the other chaps you an' me mought try it on."

"Stalk him?"

"Sartain. We'll make a still hunt on't. Thar ain't no other style."

"But what do you mean?"

Jerry glanced at his companion with a look of supreme disdain.

"Well, I'll sw'ar—S'pose, though, you don't know no better. Thar ain't much deer-stalking on the city streets. Ye've heered, I calc'late, 'bout how an Injun follers up a track?"

"On yes!"

"It's jist that way we've got to go fur our buck. Why, man alive, I've trailed them twenty mile afore now, through the wust kind o' timber. Wish to Ju-pet'er, though, that Nebby was home. Dogs is a nuisance on a deer trail."

"Nebby seems well trained."

"Yes, yes. Cal'late I kin keep the pup at my heels. Though if he breaks at the wrong minute it's all up."

Without further remark Jerry started forward at a quick pace, sternly repressing the dog, and ordering him to follow close behind.

Pierce had to exert himself to keep up with his loose-jointed companion. Holding their rifles at a

trail they walked rapidly through the open forest, with the autumn leaves nestling in the trees, and dropping downward like a silent rain.

Pierce kept silent for a half-mile of this quick walk, though he was quite at a loss to know what it all meant. His curiosity at length got the advantage.

"I can't see for the life of me, where you are going, Jerry," he remarked. "You don't expect to strike a deer by making a straight wake through the trees?"

"Not much," returned Jerry, slackening his pace. "Back there, Nebby! Jest you keep your paws at my heels, or I'll bu'st your b'il'er."

"How then?" persisted Pierce.

"Aren't we on his trail?" growled Jerry, in a snarling tone. "Thar's deer track on the sile as plain as if it was printed in butter. See here!" and he pointed down to a spot amid the fallen leaves. "I'se pose you kin make that out?"

"I only see that the leaves are slightly pressed down."

"That's the mark of a deer's hoof," laughed Jerry. "The critter passed here inside o' two hours."

Pierce looked up in surprise.

"How can you make that out?"

"Don't you see it's a new track? The leaves are coming down here like snow, but thar ain't one teched it. Why, bless us, I could folter a trail like that at five miles an hour, from sun-up to night, and never miss a foot-print—Back, Nebby, you uneasy villain!"

Jerry had again started quickly forward, following with complete confidence the slight marks which Pierce could barely distinguish.

Their path led them up, or rather around the flanks of another hill. The forest here became more open, while the soil grew barren and stony. Progress was not so easy on the springy turf; and the deer tracks became fainter, to judge by Jerry's slower pace and close watchfulness.

He stopped entirely, at length, on a space covered by small flat stones, and looked cautiously around.

"Any scent 'bout, Nebby?" he asked the whimpering dog, who was coursing here and there, with his nose to the ground.

"Not as I 'spect much scentin' from a stag-hound," he explained. "Only Nebby's got a good nose, fur one of his breed."

Pierce rested quietly on his rifle, not venturing to compete with his two experienced companions, in the search for the deer trail.

Slowly over the stony level Jerry advanced, finding indications of the buck's passage in the most unpromising spots.

"See whar his hoof has scraped the moss from that stone," he explained. "An' yander's his track as plain as if it was done in ink. Not an hour old, either, I'll venture to say."

Pierce curiously followed his pointing finger. One of the flat stones appeared to have been displaced from a larger one beneath, its shape being outlined on the lower stone, in a broad moist spot.

"He weren't goin' very fast, neither," said Jerry. "We ought to overhaul him in a mile or two more."

"But how do you make all that out?"

"His hoof struck this stone," explained Jerry; "but not over hard, or it would slid further. He were jist out of a walk."

"And how do you know it was less than an hour ago?"

"It's as plain as the nose on Nebby's face," laughed the woodsman. "Ye see that stone's wet. That's part of night- afore- last's rain. The upper stone has kept it from dryin'!"

"Exactly."

"Waal, with this air, that stone ought to be as dry as your hand in less nor an hour. But it ain't quite dry yet."

Pierce's acknowledgment of his sense of Jerry's shrewdness was prevented by the dog, who gave a quick, knowing yelp, and then a deep bay, as he sprang eagerly forward.

"Hold, hound! Hold, villain! Blast me if I don't wing ye!" yelled the scout, half raising his rifle. "Shet down on that trumpet, or it'll be worse fur ye!"

The hound paused unwillingly in his eager course, and returned, with drooping ears, at the renewed commands of his master.

"If the buck's inside of ear-shot, ye've gi'n him a start, and us a five mile further trail, blast ye pi-ter!" growled Jerry, as he stepped quickly forward to the spot at which the dog seemed to have taken the scent.

"Yes, yere's the track ag'in, sure as shootin'," he continued. "The dog's got a good nose, as I said afore."

The spot at which the trail was again taken up was beyond the stony locality. A thin turf here covered the ground, with a slight spread of fallen leaves. But Jerry seemed to have no difficulty in recognizing the tracks of the deer, and he stepped forward at a good pace.

They had now passed the curve on the hill, about half-way to its summit. A few minutes more brought them to the foot of the opposite slope, the bottom of the incline here being clothed in bushes.

Through these Jerry made his way, following a path which he said had been made by the deer.

"Our buck's gone through it," he continued. "They know these bush openings, and don't make new tracks 'cept they're in a desp'r' hurry. Ahal! It's jist as I 'spect. The critter's been tryin' his antlers."

Pierce followed the direction of his finger, which pointed to a bush whose branches appeared to have been freshly broken. They were bent in an upward

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

direction, as if by a lifting force, and the splintered wood was yet moist.

"Are you sure it was the deer?" asked Pierce. "Some of Joe Smith's party came this way."

"Sure!" repeated Jerry. "I'm certain, anyhow, and that's as good as sure. Tain't possible ye don't know that a man breaks a limb one way, and a deer another? A man's fist pulls things down, but a deer's horns lift them up. You kin bet yer level dollar that's no human's handiwork. Come ahead. The scents gettin' warm."

A mile further on it grew cold again. A most unpromising bit of stone intervened, over which Jerry made his way slowly and doubtfully.

"I'd try the dog's nose ag'in, only I'm feared of his tongue," he remarked. "Here's the soft side; but I'll sw'ar I've lost the trail. Ah yander's what I was lookin' fur."

He stepped briskly forward, to where a slight gurgling sound announced the presence of flowing water. A spring burst out at this spot from beneath the rock-bed, its waters flowing in a narrow rivulet through the forest, their course marked by a line of fresher verdure.

Jerry was in a moment beside the flowing rivulet, his one sharp eye eagerly following it in its downward course.

"Good!" he cried, after a minute. "Ye kin most allers trust a buck's love of a drink. Thar's where our chap has come for water. And yander—by—"

We will not repeat the oath that fell from his lips, as he cast a reproachful look at Nebby, who shrunk back as if he knew himself in fault.

"Thar's no use talkin'; but it's enough to make a stink sw'ar!"

"What is wrong now?"

"The scary critter had his nose in this very water, when that confounded dog let out, a while ago. It's all here in the mud. That's the quick step he made when he heard the yelp. An' here's whar he stood, with his head up, sniffin' the air. He sprung from here. Ye kin see how his hoofs dug inter the mud. I bet high he went off like a flash of lightnin' at that rascally brute's yelp."

He cast another glance of reproach at Nebby as he stepped over the stream, and took the trail again, while Pierce was yet curiously engaged in reading the tell-tale indications in the muddy banks of the rivulet.

Meanwhile the remainder of the party, disappointed in their deer hunt, and having unaccountably lost sight of the scout, had returned to the camp, a little disposed to growl at their ill-luck.

They fully expected to find their missing friend awaiting them at the tents. He was not there, however. A slight sense of uneasiness at his protracted absence arose in their minds, which increased as an hour rolled by without his putting in an appearance. The reported presence of Mark Preston in that vicinity gave them just cause for apprehension.

"Did any of you see Joe Smith and his party?" asked Harry Waters anxiously.

"He was a tall, lank, raw-boned chap, was he not?" asked Ben.

"Exactly. You know Mark Preston. Was he with him?"

"No. Smith was alone. I met a couple of his followers afterward, but I certainly did not see Preston."

"I tell you what, boys," cried Harry, "there's deviltry afoot. We must do something. I move we start out on a scout for our missing friend. Sure as you live, he is in trouble."

"Agreed," exclaimed Jack Hasard. "And take the dogs. Their noses will be better than our eyes."

In five minutes more they had set off, in different directions, through the forest, preceded by the two dogs, Pete being left alone in charge of the camp.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING MAN.

THE five men who thus started from the camp in search of Will Wildfire branched off in as many directions, each toward some point where the missing man might have been likely to proceed for practice with the rifle, he having taken no other weapon. The down-stream route was the most promising, and Harry Waters and Ben Huntly took that course, each followed by one of the dogs. Harry crossed to the west side of the creek, Pete setting him over and then rowing the boat back to the camp. Ben, with the older pointer, followed the eastern bank.

In a minute more they had all disappeared in the deep forest, the crackle of dead leaves beneath their tramping feet had ceased, and silence reigned around the deserted camp.

"Spec'dey t'ink I likes dis," grumbled Pete, as he slowly paddled the boat back. "Ain't nuffin to do 'cept to roll 'bout on de grass while dey's out huntin'. Got a mighty good mind to go a-fishin'. Don't b'lieve nobod'y'll run 'way wid de plates an' vittals. Hoopee! won't dar be fun ef dey come back an' fine Pete a-missin'! Spec'dey'll be arter me wid dem hounds jess as dey's arter Marse Will—an' a little boot-leather to foller up de hounds. Dat's de wuss feature 'bout it."

He slowly fastened the boat to the bank, still cogitating:

"Wonder of dar ain't no catties in dis yar creek? I's bound to fine dat out. I's jess tired of pearch?"

The attraction was too strong to resist. In a few minutes Pete had provided himself with a line and a proper supply of bait, and was making his way along the creek bank in search of a promising locality for "catties."

"Muss git back 'fore de boot-leather comes in," he muttered. "Dat's a kind o' exercise which dis big don't 'precate."

While Pete was thus engaged in the ancient and

honorable sport of fishing, the others were scouring the woods in quest of their missing comrade. For several miles they thus proceeded, examining every point where the attraction of game would be likely to have drawn him, but without finding him or any trace of his recent presence.

Nor were the dogs more successful than the men. They put up abundance of quail and rabbits, and a stray woodcock or two, but they could not be made to understand that larger game was now required.

Ben Huntly's dog struck the same course he had followed on the previous day. He led eagerly past the swamp and through the thicket, stopping, every now and then, to point some concealed bird.

But Ben flushed this game without mercy, and pushed on for the open woods below. Suddenly the dog paused, snuffed the ground eagerly for a minute, and then gave a long, whining cry. The instinct of the hound was aroused in him. With his nose to the grass he ran slowly onward, whining at intervals.

"What in the blazes is he after?" queried Ben. "It must be a cold scent, or his keen nose would take it up quicker than that. He is heading straight for the creek."

A few minutes brought them to the bushy borders of the stream. Ben stopped suddenly, exclaiming with angry emphasis:

"Shoot me if this isn't where the deer took to the water! The dog is on its old trail. Come here, Carlo. A blamed good nose you've got, my lad, but we don't want to follow such old issues. I hope Harry will have more luck, for I'll bet a cow I'm on the wrong side of the water."

He continued his search, however, following down the narrow space between the creek and the mountain.

As for Harry Waters, who was searching the woods beyond the creek, he had, as yet, no greater luck. The sharp-scented dog took up more than one trail, but they were near the runways on the mountain where Jerry Prime had posted his party, and he whistled Sport sharply from these distracting scents.

"Don't want to follow our own footsteps," he admonished the eager brute. "Let us strike further south. Will may have gone in this direction."

He continued onward for a mile without success, the wood opening out as he advanced, and presenting long, sunny vistas.

"There's Pierce Browning, too, among the missing," soliloquized Harry. "I wonder if he has struck on Will, and if the pair of them—Hallo! Sport. What's up, lad? What have you struck, my hearty?"

The dog was running about, with his nose to the ground, occasionally giving vent to a sharp yelp.

"He has something there, sure. Not a bird, either, for Will says he pointed beautifully yesterday. Come, lad; after it, my hearty!"

"With a fresh yelp the young dog ran eagerly forward, with his nose to the ground, giving Harry all he could do to follow him.

"Steady! Steady, there! Slow up, boy! slow up, you brute!"

Whistling the animal back, and forcing him to proceed at a slower pace, Harry followed his deviant course, which led through the open wood, but over more than one hill, and across more than one valley. He finally reached the beautiful green valley in which Will had caught sight of the buck anhour or two before. It was now silent and deserted. With little thought of its beauty Harry crossed it quickly, in the rear of the dog, who ran up the opposite hill.

Instead of continuing in the course he had so far pursued, the animal now turned and traced his way along the northern declivity of this hill, giving vent to another impatient cry as he did so."

His yelp was echoed a moment afterward by the sharp report of a rifle and by a crashing sound, as if some heavy body had fallen.

Harry darted eagerly forward, following the swift-running dog.

Indeed, more than one interest had been converging upon this locality, for the fugitive deer, whose wandering steps had been so closely and shrewdly followed by Jerry Prime and his apprentice in the art of woodcraft, Pierce Browning, had, after many devious turns, led back toward the region which Harry Waters had just reached.

We take up the thread of the still hunt again at a point in which it had become of deep interest to the two huntsmen.

They had struck a most unpromising piece of ground, and for a full quarter of a mile Jerry had been at fault, having lost all indications of the trail.

"It's durned queer," he cried, after a further unsuccessful effort. "I've picked up a trail in consider'ble wuss ground than this; and not stopped at once nor twice neither. That chap's been goin' as quiet as an old cat on the track of a mouse. Ef he'd put his foot down heavy I couldn't miss it, now-how."

"How would it do to try the dog again?" suggested Pierce.

"It wouldn't do fur nothin'. Thar ain't no trustin' his tongue, ye see. Ef he were to give tongue now, that deer would go like a streak; fur if it ain't in easy hearin' then don't buy me fur a scout."

"Back, Nebby! Back, lovely!" he continued, as the dog showed a desire to press forward. "Back, I say, you crop-eared reprobate, or I'll bu'st yer b'il'er! Ye're too consarned eager fur a dog as has been trained like a gentleman—Aba! by the seven blessed pipers, thar's luck fur them as waits fur it!"

He sprung quickly forward as he spoke. Pierce watched him curiously. A smooth-barked beech spread its wide boughs over the spot where they stood. The woodsman closely examined the bark of

this tree, at a spot in which its smooth skin appeared to have been frayed.

"Jist as I judged," he exclaimed. "That scratch was made by a deer's antlers. And see here! Here he stopped to browse. Any old hand could tell at a flash that a deer's teeth cropped that grass. All's lovely again, Mr. Browning. We'll be on him in a jiffy. Keerful now, Keerful, Nebby."

He walked cautiously forward, with his rifle at a trail, his eye fixed keenly on the ground.

"Yes, yes, yere's the trail again, lively. D'y'e see that leaf?"

He showed Pierce a dead leaf, with a slight puncture near its point, in a curved shape.

"Thar ye've got the p'int of the buck's hoof photografted, just as plain as if it was took by one of them double-barreled likeness machines. An' I doubt ef it's ten minutes since he went over this ground. Steady, now, steady!"

They went forward for a few paces more. Jerry was walking with a cat-like tread, which Pierce tried in vain to emulate. They were ascending a slight incline, covered by large trees, and with clumps of bushes here and there.

"You ain't seen this deer yet, I s'pose?" said Jerry, in a subdued tone.

"No."

"And don't half b'lieve it's here? Ye can't swallow that a woodsman kin tell whar a deer has traveled, and whar he is, just as sure as ef the critter stood afore his eyes?"

"It is hard to credit," acknowledged Pierce.

"Well, you shall see with yer own two eyes, an' mighty soon. In ten steps more we'll top that hill, and ef we don't see a full-horned buck on t'other side, and in good rifle-shot, then don't b'lieve me ag'in, that's all. Nebby, you villain! Drop that now, ef you know when yer well off."

He shook his finger warningly at the dog, who was growing very uneasy.

"Don't break a twig or a leaf," whispered Jerry. "Them boots of yours come down like pile-drivers. Now, now, keerful!"

A step or two more and their heads overtopped the brow of the hill, Jerry held his hand back warningly to the dog, and stopped his companion with a touch from the other hand.

"Don't tell me!" he whispered, while an inaudible laugh marked his face. "Come up one step more. Look yander, between the two oaks! A perfect beauty, ef I ever see'd one. Don't talk 'bout trailin'. D'y'e twig him?"

"Yes," replied Pierce, in an eager tone, as his eyes fell on the spectacle to which his experienced guide was pointing.

There, near the foot of the slope, quietly grazing the green herbage on the edge of the valley, stood a stately buck, his branching antlers almost sweeping the ground as he bent to browse the rich grasses.

It was doubtless the same deer, and almost at the same spot which Will Wildfire had aimed at an hour or two before, when his shot had been so fatally interrupted.

"Hist! Don't make a leaf crackle. It's as pretty a shot as I ever see'd. Shill I drop him; or d'y'e want to try your hand?"

"It looks too much like murder," rejoined Pierce, as he raised his rifle.

"Murder be derred!" was Jerry's contemptuous reply. "We folks, as is in the trade, git over sich sentimental idees as that. Howsomever, I kin easy make him lift his head, ef ye'd prefer to take him that way."

"I certainly should."

"All right. Get a good bead on him fust. Ef you don't fetch him, mind, my old rifle's got to show her metal."

Pierce had the rifle at his shoulder, his eye on the sights, and waited patiently until Jerry should startle the deer into lifting its head; when, from a short distance to their right came the quick sharp yelp of a dog.

The deer's head went up like a flash, his nostrils dilated, his eyes glancing quickly to right and left.

"Drat that dog!" cried Jerry. "Quick! He's goin' to jump! Aim a foot over his head, and let drive!"

Pierce had never pulled trigger on a deer before, but he was a fair rifleman, and his nerves were at this instant as steady, his sight as true, as if he had been cast in bronze.

The spring of the deer and the crack of his rifle were simultaneous. Jerry had raised his weapon in readiness if Pierce should miss.

But, there was no need of a second shot. The form of the bounding animal seemed to suddenly collapse, the stately head drooped, the legs stiffened out. The force of the leap carried him twenty feet through the air, when he came down with a crashing thud, striking on the points of his antlers, and rolling over in a headlong somerset.

"Don't want no extra bullet than," remarked Jerry, lowering his rifle. "Never see'd a purtier shot, for a greenhorn."

"All chance," replied Pierce, as he looked with some pride on the lifeless figure of the animal. "I couldn't do it again."

"Don't know 'bout that. Chance don't give nerve and eyesight.—But whar's that blamed dog?"

A noise in the bushes answered him. Nebby started forward growling, and showing his white teeth. His master followed.

"Mough as well see what it all means."

A dozen paces took them out of the bushes, into a little opening, into which Harry Waters and his dog emerged at the same time.

But neither party went further, for there in the center of this opening, lay the lifeless form of Will Wildfire, his face the hue of death, while the blood slowly oozed from a spot near his temple.

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

CHAPTER X.

PETE GOES A-FISHING, AND GETS CAUGHT.

"Don't b'lieve dar's nothin' but pearch in dis yero creek," grumbled Pete, after a half-hour's fishing, in which he had brought up a slender show of yellow beauties. "It's catties I's arter, and I don't wan't none o' yer old pearch."

Wrapping his line around the pole he started down the creek, in search of a locality in which catfish might be found. Dropping the line in at any promising point, he slowly moved downward, until he was nearly a mile below the camp.

At length a sudden tug on the extremity of his line buried the floating cork, and wakened Pete from his listlessness.

"S'pose it's another pearch. Bites like one," he muttered, as he gave a quick jerk to fasten the hook, and then, with a strong, steady pull, lifted the line from the water.

At its extremity hung a naked-skinned, whitish fish, with flattened head, and wide, sickle-shaped jaws.

"Ef dar ain't a catfish!" cried the delighted boy, as he quickly landed his catch. "A reg'lar brown-backer, too; jess de bess kind, an' fat as butter. But I isn't gwine to slide from yer s'long as dar's a catfish left."

Removing the fish from the hook with great care, for Pete knew better than to fool with catfish spines, he baited his hook and threw it in again, seating himself luxuriously on the sharp root of an old chestnut, which here overlooked the stream.

For a half-hour more he continued to fish, with varied success, adding several catties, and some other fish to his first catch.

"Bet I's gwine to keep dese catties in de pan till de folks is all filled up. Den I'll ax 'em, 'Don't ye lub catfish?' an' dey'll say, 'Bet we does, Pete, but don't want to bu'st on fish.' Den I'll come in dis way—'Ain't so berry hungry, but don't like to see good vittals spile.' An' de way dem catties'll slide down dis nig's throat! Yaw! yaw! I's got to laff when I t'inks— Hey! w'a's dat?"

Pete's laugh was suddenly changed to an intent observation of the stream. It curved just above him, and around that curve, a minute before, a boat had appeared, rowed by a skillful hand.

But the boy was just then too intent on his fish to perceive what was going on around him. When, at length, his keen eyes did get sight of the boat its occupant had disappeared, and it was floating down the center of the channel apparently unoccupied.

"Ef dar ain't our skiff!" ejaculated the boy. "Oh, lawsee! we'll hab boot-leather now sure. Dere's dat ole cook Jack 'll kick Pete squar' froo de camp. Mustn't tied it right when I foched it back from 't other side. Dar it goes!"

Pete stood looking wistfully at the floating boat, which was now opposite him, the curve of the channel here taking it near the opposite shore.

"Dar's no use talkin'," continued the boy. "I's gwine fur dat boat."

He kicked off his shoes as he spoke, threw his jacket and his cap on the soil, and carefully laid aside his rod and line.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, as he set his bare foot in the water, and drew it back with a shudder. "It's Jess as cold's it if come from an ice-house. Good deal sooner stay whar I is. Can't get dat boat dough, 'thout goin' for it. Anyhow, it's on'y de fust jump dat hurts."

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"Hope de oars is in it," he muttered, drawing himself further up. "It's 'mazin' queer dis boat got loose anyhow. Dar's no tellin' how things does happen."

He had now drawn himself half out of the water. What was his astonishment to see the form of a man suddenly raise up in the center of the boat, while strong hand grasped him by the arm, with a quick, vigorous lift.

"Marse Preston!" ejaculated Pete, in surprise and dread, as he was lifted into the boat.

"There's no telling how things happen, you know," said his captor with a grim smile.

Pete looked nervously around him, and was on the point of screaming for help, when his speech was cut short by a choking hand at his throat, and he was pressed helplessly down into the boat.

"The infernal young hound, I owe him a settler!" growled the irate captor, setting his knee on the breast of the helpless boy.

And the boat glided on, under the blue sky, and the shade of overhanging trees.

It was some time after this that, into the water-side camp, was borne the body of Will Wildfire, still insensible, though evidently not dead.

The other boat had been moored further up the creek, by some of those who had searched in that direction. These had now returned, however, bringing the boat with them, and setting the mournful procession across the creek.

"Not as he's dead," remarked Jerry. "That bullet couldn't 'a' bored in, or the man wouldn't shivered arterwards. But a bullet in the temple ain't to be sneezed at, even if it's only a touch."

"Where is Pete?" asked Harry of those who had returned before.

"The Lord knows! He was gone when we got in. He and the boat. Likely enough the young hound is out on a fishing excursion."

While they bore Will into the tent, and were making efforts to resuscitate him, Jerry took the remaining boat, and dropped down the creek, with intent to bring in the slain deer.

He came back in half an hour, in company with Joe Smith, whom he had met in the woods. They brought the deer with them, and hung it up in a tree near the camp, over the snuffing noses of the impatient dogs.

"How is it turned out?" asked Jerry, as he proceeded quietly to open the dead animal. "Hope it ain't been a settler."

"No. He shows signs of coming to. After all, the bullet glanced on the bone, and did not enter. It was the shock that upset him."

"Don't I know that?" answered Jerry coolly. "Got the bullet here. Dug it outer the tree beyond where he stood."

He extracted it with finger and thumb from his vest-pocket, and handed it to Joe Smith. A quick emotion seemed to affect that individual on examining it.

"Do you mean to say that the man was shot by this bullet?" he exclaimed.

"Waal, it's about that," drawled Jerry.

"And have any of ye a notion who done it?"

"Yes," replied Ben Huntly. "We fancy it was one of the gentlemen whom you led to the hunt. The one called Mark Preston."

"I'll be wallop'd if it, wasn't, then!" ejaculated the tall woodsman. "He had my old rifle. And if this ain't one of the identer bullets I poured fer it this very mornin', then I don't know my own private mark, that's all."

There was a decided stir in the camp at this positive announcement.

"Where is he?" asked Harry.

"Not much do I know. The rest has gone back to Coalville, but he ain't turned up. Mebbe he's got panic-struck with the notion that he's done murder, and made tracks from these diggin's."

" Didn't I hear say that the boat were missin'?" asked Jerry, as he proceeded with his task of skinning the deer.

At this suggestion Harry walked quickly to the point at which the boat had been fastened.

"It was not Pete that took it," he announced. "The rope is not untied. It has been cut; and by a very sharp knife."

"Thought so," said Joe, coolly. "He's been panic-struck. Been afraid that his legs wouldn't hold out in a cross-country tramp, so he's took to the creek, 'spectin' to make a good lift by water."

"But where's the boy?" asked Ben.

"Off on some deviltry, I s'pose. That's what generally runs in boys' heads."

Joe Smith was not loth to accept an engagement to go down the creek in pursuit of the stolen boat. Without stopping to cavil on terms, he whistled his dog to his heels, and set off at a round pace, along the downward course of the stream.

Meanwhile, Jerry continued his task of skinning and cleaning the game. He had barely finished when the lank form of Joe Smith stalked again into the camp, at the same pace with which he had left it.

"Does any of you recknize them articles?" he asked, as he threw down a coat, cap, and pair of shoes, together with a wrapped-up fishing-line."

"Yes," was the reply. "They were Pete's. Where did you find them?"

"Bout a half-mile down-stream. There's bigger deviltry afloat, yit. The boy jumped overboard, and didn't come back for these traps. There's some at durned odd 'bout the whole bizness."

"What is to be done?" asked Harry.

Joe drew Jerry aside, and the two woodsmen stood conversing for several minutes, while the others waited the result of their deliberations.

"It's two good hours to sunset," Joe at length announced. "If you want to catch this hound, we mought put in some neat work in that time."

"Of course we want to catch him," cried Pierce, who just then appeared from the tent, "and to pay him up in good coin for this murderous attempt."

"Your friend ain't no wor'e, is he?" asked Joe.

"No. He is coming to. Will be all right in an hour. But what is your plan?"

"Why, me and Jerry, with the dogs, will go down-stream, and keep an eye open fur trails on both sides. Maybe he'll 'scape our eyes, and our dogs' noses, but I've a notion he won't. The same time a couple of you kin take a boat and foller him down-stream. An' take particklar care to look into every water-hole or bush. He mought hide somewhere to fling us. I s'pose there's some of ye who can handle an oar!"

"Try us," replied Ben Huntly, with a smile at his friends. "It is likely we can handle an oar with anybody on the Carbon; or on the Schuykill either."

"Let's be off, then. When a plan's laid, every minute spent in talk is just wasted. Set Jerry across the creek. I'll take this side. And mind ye, when we go on a track we mean work. Ef he ain't run down to-night, he mought be to-morrow. Jist say the word and there'll be no let up."

In five minutes more the scouting party had set out, the two woodsmen on foot, and Ben and Harry at the oars.

CHAPTER XI.

TREE.

At a point about six miles below the camping ground, on the bank of Carbon creek, the glare of a bivouac fire throws itself across the stream, and

lights up the somber forest depths on the other side of the waters. The night air is very chilly, and the four men surrounding the bright flame crowd in closely to its radiant warmth.

"Don't know nothin' better nor fire; 'cept it's water," remarks Jerry Prime, rubbing his hands before the blaze as though he were washing them.

"Or whisky," chimes in Joe Smith.

Harry Waters and Ben Huntly form the remaining members of the party. Squatting in Indian fashion they sit looking into the vivid flames, while the dash of the firelight kindles up their faces, and gleams through the woodland avenues behind them.

"I hope our blaze won't draw any wild beasts in this direction," remarked Harry, looking over his shoulder. "I suppose, though, there's nothing left in these regions more dangerous than a rabbit or a ground squirrel."

"Think so, hey?" drawled Jerry.

"Yes. There's have been too many wide-awakes rifles about these mountains for the health of wild beasts."

"Now don't ye be goin' away with any sick notion," returned Jerry. "They're thinned out, I guv in to that. But that's a good show of wild ground 'bout these mountings, and I've a solid notion that a stray catamount mought be kicked up yet."

"I hope to the stars that none of them will pay us a visit," and Harry looked nervously behind him.

"Oh! they aren't as thick as strawb'rries in a patch. The last I seen was—let me see—well, a good ten years back. I were comin' over the flank of old Cromlech—that's the tall mounting ye mought ha' glimpsed off yander, to the sou'east'ard. It were a good two o'clock in the mornin' by the stars. Didn't carry no other watch in them days. Waal, I were comin' to feel better lonesome, fur the night war dark an' chilly, an' I'd a good six mile afore me. Suddenly I heerd a sound that just made my blood stand still fur one minute. Can't venture to d'scribe it. Somethin' between a squeal an' a scream. It's one of them things that's no words fur, but which no old hunter ever thinks is a stray baby or a stragglin' cald. Ef ye's ever heerd a catamount, y' wouldn't want no dictionary to recknize his voice."

"I suppose you thought it a good time to try your speed?" suggested Ben.

"Yes, I'd thoughts o' that kind. But these critters slip long the ground an' the trees at a 'mazin' pace. And, I dunno whether it's by smell or no, but they kin foller a man like a hound follers a rabbit. It come to me, then, to stand still, and wait. Besides, I took a sudden hankerin' arter that chap's hide."

"And I suppose he had a wuss hankerin' after your hide," drawled Joe.

"Well, as I war sayin', I hadn't come to anchor five minutes afore I heerd a sudden rustle in the leaves, and then I cotched sight of somethin' bigger nor any hornets' nest a-top a long bough, not fifty foot off. But that were never no hornets' nest lit up by lanterns like brute's eyes. Ther' were some blinks o' moonlight then, ye see, that sent me the glint of 'em; an' they weren't the most comfor'ble light as ever shined on me, you bet."

"You had your rifle?" asked Harry.

"Ef I hadn't I'd ha' been breakin' my neck over stick an' stone for my shanty, stead o' mazin' fur an interview. I weren't long in drawin' a bead, neither. But the whole thing had been outrageous sudden. I stood in the open, in a patch o' moonlight, an' the critter were crouched fur a jump when my eyes grabbed him. He were in the air afore I could touch the trigger."

"That was what I should call a critical situation," remarked Ben.

"Wuss nor fever an' ager. I jist rattled in my boots, I shook so. But it weren't no place to lose nerve. I hed the rifle at my shoulder, and got it p'inted upward, when down come the brute. Sure as you live its breast struck squar' on the muzzle. Down I went if I'd been hit by a stroke of lightnin', an' I shet my eyes for a minute, not speelin' to see the sun ag'in. But, whether ye'd b'lieve it or no don't matter, but sure's you set that stroke set off the rifle. As I went down, the solid old critter spoke out in her sharp, sudden way, but it war all so mixed up with screamin', an' rappin', an' rollin', that ye'd thought an earthquake had broke its b'arter. Not as I hadn't an idee of what had took place; but I crawled outer that like a cat up a back fence, 'fore I ventured to look. That was that brute a-tossin', an' snarlin', and bittin' the ground like all possessed. 'Tawn't healthy round that jist then. I rammed another charge down the barrel quick as a flash, an' fired at the bunch, for ye couldn't told for yer life which was head an' which was tail. That bullet hit him in a tender spot, fur he straightened out jist the suddenest, an' it were all over with that painter."

It was past midnight when Jerry had finished his panther story. The moon, which had shed a faint luster over the trees, had now sunk beneath the distant mountain line. All was deep gloom, except in the narrow space lit by the camp-fire.

"I hope we won't have any such gentlemen smellin' around here," remarked Harry, as he sleepily stretched himself out.

"Ain't much fear of that," returned Joe Smith, toasting his huge feet before the fire. "Guess Jerry shot the last of 'em that time."

"Anybody as don't b'lieve it, jist let 'em step up to my shanty, an' I'll show 'em the skin," asserted Jerry. "Don't fancy myself that catamount is as plump as caterpillars. But that's one thing I do know. That's bar in the mountings yit."

"Bar?" asked Harry, doubtfully.

"Bear," he means," growled Joe. "He ain't much on education, ain't Jerry."

"It's allers been b'ar, ever since I could squint," persisted Jerry. "Mebbe Joe's gettin' inter now."

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

fangled ways; but I ain't that kind. Howsoever, 'tain't two days since one was sighted. Not ten miles from here, neither. Ther's a party got up now, that's a-going fur him to-morrer. I mought take a hand in't myself, ef we get through this job in time. A big, black devil, they say, as'll make fight. It a'most frightened Ned Bunting, who see'd it, out of ten years' growth."

"Look a-here, Jerry," growled Joe, from his reumbent position, "when are ye goin' to shet up that talk-mill of yourn? If it's set to run all night I'll move, that's all."

Jerry, with the current of his eloquence thus suddenly checked, seemed to struggle for a minute with an answer. But not finding any suitable to the dignity of the crisis, he threw himself quickly back, grumbling out:

"Oh! go to sleep. You're wuss nor a sore ear!"

Ten minutes afterward the whole camp was asleep, and silence reigned over the midnight woods.

The early hours of the next morning found all astir in the vicinity of the tents. Jack Hasard, aided by Phil Carson, the remaining member of the party, was diligently occupied in the mysteries of breakfast, an occupation for which Jack had a special fancy. Pierce Browning and Will Wildfire were slowly walking up and down the edge of the creek, busily conversing.

Will looked little the worse for wear. He was slightly pale, and a huge patch of sticking plaster covered the vicinity of his right temple, but he seemed to have gained his ordinary strength and spirits.

The murderous bullet had, in fact, struck glancingly on his forehead, less than half an inch from the temple. His sudden movement in aiming at the deer had probably saved his life. The ball had struck the bone, and glanced off at a wide angle plowing a furrow an inch long in his forehead, but producing only a flesh wound.

His long insensibility had resulted from the shock to his brain, but had produced no injurious result. Very probably the blood oozing from the temple had satisfied the villain of the death of his victim, as it had almost satisfied his friends, at first sight.

"Matters have got to be squared between Mark Preston and me," said Will, with his firm setting of his lips. "It has gone far enough in this way. Hang me if I'm going to set myself up as a target for his rifle practice."

"You are right there," returned Pierce. "I would shoot him down like a dog, if I were in your place."

"What can have become of that boy? I wouldn't lose Pete for a little."

"Breakfast! Breakfast!" roared Jack Hasard. "I haven't any bell to ring you in; but here's your venison steaks sizzling, and your potatoes as brown as gingerbread."

"No bell!" repeated Pierce. "Why that voice of yours could outrail a hotel gong. Come in, Will, you need some strength."

The venison steaks were voted delightful, the potatoes fried to a turn, and the coffee a wonderful success. And it was astonishing what havoc their woodland appetites made in the provender.

"It is my treat," said Pierce. "Make yourselves at home, gentlemen. It is my first deer, but I won't be mean about it."

A thundering fool of a buck it must have been," growled Jack, "to jump in the track of your rifle. It must have been sheer Providence, for I don't believe you could hit a church side, at a hundred paces."

Thus chaffing and having a good time generally, they got through breakfast, after which Pierce and Will, followed by the dogs, started off for a walk through the woods.

They had no very defined object, though the thought was not absent from their minds that they might possibly aid in the search which their friends were making.

"I hardly know how I would act if we were to meet with Mark Preston," said Will. "My intentions are not amicable, you may be sure of that. I wouldn't care to quite kill the fellow, though I would be glad to give him something to keep me in memory."

"He deserves a bullet," answered Pierce, with a stern expression. "Why not challenge the hound, and make him fight? To be sure that would be a better chance than he deserves, but—"

"Oh! I don't fear him," rejoined Will. "He would not have the heart to stand before a man's face."

They continued on for several miles, following the course of the creek. Finally the dogs got on the scent of game, and led them back into the woods, where they succeeded in bringing down several partridges. Pierce alone had a shot-gun. Will had brought his rifle, and took no part in this sport.

They were thus gradually led up the incline of the mountain, which here ascended by a gentle slope. For a mile further they proceeded in this direction, losing sight of game, though the dogs sought diligently. All at once Sport, the young dog, gave tongue, and started off with his nose to the ground.

"Come here! Here, you villain!" cried Will, angrily. "It's not a pointer's business to run rabbits. You are getting a very bad education."

As he spoke, Carlo, the older dog, struck the same scent. He whined, yelped in a peculiar manner, and ran about in a distressed, uncertain sort of fashion.

"That is no rabbit," remarked Pierce. "The dog is at fault. It is evidently a new scent to him, and one which troubles him. Let them go, Will, I am curious to know what sort of game this is."

Will answered by grasping his rifle at a trail, and

following the dogs, which were already eagerly, but somewhat uncertainly, following the scent.

It led on over the mountain flank, leading gradually upward, and then downward, into a glen that divided two hills.

"See here!" cried Pierce, as they came to a clump of underbrush. "The creature, whatever it is, has gone straight through the bushes; and made no light wake either. It is some bulky animal."

"Another deer?" suggested Will.

"No. I haven't been on a deer trail for nothing. There has been no hounds nor antlers here."

"What can it be then?" asked Will, as they followed the dogs through the bushes.

He was answered by a sudden cry, in a distressed tone of voice; a loud appeal for help. It seemed to come from their left, where a thicket of brambles barred the way.

With a loud yelp the dogs ran around this obstruction, followed eagerly by their masters, who had just heard a renewal of the distressed call.

"Here, Pierce; down the glen!" cried Will, dashing forward, with ready rifle, to where the dogs seemed to have stopped, and were barking furiously.

Pierce rushed through a corner of the brambly thicket, caring little for the thorns that rent his clothes, in the excitement of the moment.

A strange spectacle presented itself to them on passing this obstruction. Before them spread a smooth surface, shelving down to a brook that traversed the bottom of the glen, and thinly dotted with trees. At the foot of one of these trees was the object at which the dogs were barking, a large, black, shaggy mass, out of whose rotundity rose a rounded head, with red tongue and gleaming teeth; while a pair of well-armed paws gave warning to the furious dogs.

"A bear! by all that's good!" cried Pierce. "Back, Sport! Back, Carlo! He will tear you to pieces!"

A repetition of the cry for help now drew their eyes to the tree. What was their surprise to see, on the extremity of one of its lower limbs, to which he clung with a death grip, no less a person than the foe of whom they were in search, Mark Preston.

Certain marks on the bark of the tree showed that the bear had ineffectually pursued him. Failing in this it had stationed itself at the foot, waiting patiently until its prey should fall into its open jaws.

Evidently he had recognized them at the same instant, for a deep pallor spread over his embrowned face. He was treed by worse enemies than the bear. Treed by the ghost of Will Wildfire, as he for the moment fancied.

CHAPTER XII. SHOOTING THE RAPIDS.

"D'ye see them marks?" asked Jerry, pointing down to the banks of the creek, at a locality where a small bay set in from the main current.

It was thickly overgrown with bushes, which hung down to the water's edge, but which he had parted, in his careful search for traces of the fugitive.

"Here's what he spent the night," he announced. "Ye kin see whar the bow's dug inter the mud. And the rope were tied to this saplin'. D'ye see whar it's frayed the bark? Ther' weren't never a book writ plainer."

"What then?" asked Harry. "Did he take to the water again, or has he tried to escape overland?"

"That's what's to be found out. It's my pinion he tuk to the water."

"Of course he has," exclaimed Ben. "The boat has gone."

"Bless yer eyes, man, a boat kin swim without a rower. So that counts fur nothin'. What's your pinion, Joe?"

"He's off by water," Joe quickly replied.

"Jist as I thought. Ye see, he stood here when he shoved off the boat. And he jumped in as she went off. Thar's his foot-marks in the mud, whar his toes kicked it up when he jumped."

"We must after him" remarked Joe. "The fool dunno what's ahead of him, or he'd back water straight."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that it's not five miles to the rapids of the Carbon. A mighty skittish bit o' water fer greenhorns, you bet. If he tries to shoot 'em it's a chance if he ain't drowned, and his boat ripped into kindlin'. Come, gentlemen, ther's no time to lose in cogortations."

At this hint the two young men sprang quickly into their boat. In a minute the oars were in the water, and they were swiftly rowing down-stream.

They were both good oarsmen, Ben Huntly being celebrated for his skill with the oar. Their blades fell with the precision of clockwork, and the boat shot swiftly forward under the impulse of their strength and skill. The Carbon was here some thirty feet wide, and ran with a rapid current, under the shade of overhanging boughs. It was a fresh, clear morning, and the two athletes highly enjoyed the exercise, and pulled with vim which called forth admiring encomiums from the two woodsmen.

"Dumno what them young chaps l'arned it," muttered Jerry, "but they certainly know how to feather an oar. Never seen better pullin', I'll sw'ar. That boat ain't got up muchly fur go, but they're makin' her dance."

"Ye're right there," Joe replied. "If they keep that up they'll overhaul the hound fore he git's to the rapids. Let's strike out, Jerry, cross corners, and head off the chase."

"Tain't best," rejoined Jerry, shaking his head. "You kin go, but you'd best leave me to round the turns. We don't want to overlap him."

"All right." And Joe walked off at a quick pace through the woods, with the intention of cutting off

the frequent bends of the Carbon, and thus heading the fugitive. Jerry, at the same time followed the twists of the stream, getting first some distance in advance of the boat.

And so the pursuit went on. It was what might have been called a blind trail. Nothing was seen but the water and the undisturbed earth. It is not necessary to repeat the old adage, that water leaves no trail. The stream flowed on, all unconscious of what had ruffled its waves the previous hour. And as for the land trail, the woodsmen were too confident of finding the fugitive in the boat to keep a very sharp eye on the ground they were passing over. Nebby, the dog, it is true, displayed a passing uneasiness, but he was sharply reproved for his folly, and afterward followed submissively his master's steps.

Yet it is never safe to let yourself be carried away by an idea. It was really Mark Preston's footsteps that the keen-scented dog had discovered. The scouts were correct in supposing that he had left his night's place of rest in the boat, but he had taken an early opportunity to land; rather to his misfortune, as the reader may fancy, if he considers the quandary in which we found the villain in our last chapter.

Some four miles down-stream, and within a mile of the rapids, Joe Smith at length sighted the fugitive boat. But, to his surprise, it was floating quietly on, instead of being rowed, as he had expected to find it. There was no trace of life about the drifting craft.

"That's a durned queer circumstance," remarked Joe, seating himself on the bank, and taking Tiger's head on his lap. "I dunno what your dogship thinks about it, but it's durned queer to me. There's one o' three things sartin; the chap's either dead, or drunk, or asleep."

He continued to watch the boat, as it floated down a straight reach of the water, much wondering at its deserted look. This silent espionage continued for some time, Joe slowly gathering his ideas.

"Wonder if he's giv'n us the slip?" he muttered. "I'll fetch him a halil anyhow. It mought stir him. Hey, the boat! Ahoy, there! Hey, my hearty! Rouse! rouse with a will, and be dernen to you!"

This vigorous hail was answered, after a minute, by the appearance of a head above the gunwale of the boat. It remained visible but an instant, however, and then disappeared. Yet in this glimpse Joe noticed something strange about it, a most peculiar combination of white and black, which he could not understand.

He hailed again, but without any success. The head failed to reappear.

The scout shook his shaggy locks.

"Dunno what to make of it, I'll gi'n in to that. Wish the other boat were here. Ah! yander it come now, round the upper turn. And here's Jerry."

His fellow-hunter had just then emerged from the woods.

"Ain't struck nothin'," he announced. "Hello! By the blue hills of Connecticut, what's up yander? Ye ain't twigg'd an empty boat nor nothin' ha' you?"

"Tisn't empty, Jerry. Ther's a chap in the bottom of it. But jist what he means I give up. Can't see through it."

"He's not ten minutes from the rapids. I bet that wakens him."

"And here comes our craft," said Joe. "Them fellers kin fling an oar, ther's no use talkin'. But they'll go to splinters in the rapids. You'd best git aboard, Jerry. You know all the tricks of the waters."

"I calk'late so," replied Jerry, with a knowing laugh.

A call from Joe caused the oarsmen to shift in to the shore, where the state of affairs was quickly explained to them. In a minute more Jerry was seated at the helm, and the boat had pushed off again into the current.

"It's only Providence as'll save that chap from drownin'," cried Joe. "Row like sin. Tain't wuth while to let him commit suicide. I s'pose, though, he's got as much chance down in the boat, as he would with the oars in his fists. Let out, lads. Ye may overhail him."

Not far ahead a fretting and curling could be seen in the smooth bed of the stream. Joe ran quickly forward, anxious to observe the event of the dangerous experiment.

At the point which he soon reached the stream widened, and evidently shallowed, for a number of ugly rocks stood above the surface. Between these the water swirled and twisted, shooting with race-horse speed down a steep incline, foaming violently, and occasionally leaping upward in a wild fury. There were spots that looked as smooth and bright as a mirror, and in which no one would have dreamed of the great speed to which this smoothness was due. In others all was rush and uproar, as hidden rocks fretted the swift flood.

The drifting boat came on, gaining speed with every minute, as it was swept into the resistless current of the rapids. As for the boat of the pursuers it had rapidly gained on the fugitive and was now not ten yards behind it.

"Thar's danger ahead," warned Jerry. "Hadn't we best swerve inter shore? We won't gain nothin' by follerin' that fool down the rapids."

"Can you take us down?" asked Ben.

"Ain't much feared of that."

"Then let her slide. There's nothing like taking in new experiences."

At this moment the fugitive boat poised for an instant on the very peak of the liquid declivity.

And again, at this instant, a head showed itself momentarily above the gunwale. The pursuers were not able to see it distinctly, but a loud shout came from Joe.

"Sweet us all for donkeys!" he cried, "if we ain't chasin' the little nig! It's the missing blackbird that's in the skiff."

"What, Pete?" exclaimed Ben, in an earnest tone. "By Jupiter, we must save him, then, if it's in the wood!"

"The boat's struck the channel, and head on; by the best of luck!" cried Joe. "Down, down he goes!"

"Ship ye oars!" screamed Jerry. "Trim boat! And set as still as sparrows on a fence. A feather might upset us 'mong these rocks."

The fugitive boat was shooting like an arrow down the first straight reach of the rapids. In a minute afterward the other boat struck the incline, and darted downward.

It was like gliding on an inclined plane of glass, as they entered this first smooth reach of the treacherous rapids. Harry and Ben wondered for an instant where the danger was. Their backs were to the rocks, but they might have seen the peril of their situation in Jerry's set, stern face, in the fixed glint of his eye, and in his firm clutch of the tiller.

"He's shootin' the rapids like a breeze!" cried Joe. "Ha! the craft's caught in the eddy! There it twists! The jaw-bone rock has got it! Good heavens, men, it's bein' torn as if it was in the mouth of a grizzly bear! I wouldn't give a toss of my old cap for the little nig's life! What ails him, anyhow, that he sticks to the bottom?"

The others could hear the rending of timber, but their own peril was too great for them to think of aught else. They were now shooting past rocks, swerving at quick turns into cross reaches, darting under the edge of curling foam.

"The boat's in splinters!" announced Joe. "But the nig's above water yet. He's hangin' onto the keel. Bless my eyes, if he ain't tied hand and foot! The hound's been tryin' to murder him, too."

"How fur ahead?" yelled Jerry.

"Ye'll be on him in a minute. Sure's you live he's cotched in an eddy! He's whirlin' like a dead leaf! If ye've the mind to risk it, you might grab fur him in passing. It's the on'y chance, but it mought beach you all."

Without a moment's hesitation Ben Huntly twisted round in his seat, so as to face ahead. It was a frightful sight that he beheld. All before him seemed a strange mingling of rocks and foam, and tossing waves, through which no safe passage appeared possible. And just in advance, in a little bay-like corner of the flood, an odd-looking mass was shooting round and round, in a swift eddy.

"Quick! Ther's on'y one chance. Ef you miss him it's all up, mebbe with him and you both!" cried Joe.

As for Jerry, he had but one duty to perform. His single eye was fixed keenly on the rocks ahead. He had three lives to save. The fourth must trust to its own chances.

But as they passed the whirling eddy, Ben, who had crouched down in the boat, with his arm extended outward, made a quick, successful grasp at the twisting mass. He made no perilous effort to draw it from the water, but with a vigorous hand, pressed it firmly against the side of the boat.

In an instant more the darting craft shot past the eddy, leaped between two rocks in front, and turned into a new channel, grazing one rock so closely that the sleeve and part of the flesh was torn from Ben's arm.

But, despite the sharp pain, he held on with a death grip, retaining, with all his strength, his prize against the ferocious water, which sought to tear it from his grasp.

Another quick swerve around a rock to the left, and a broad smooth channel lay before them. They were still in the rapids, and darted forward with unchecked speed. But in another minute they struck the quiet waters below, Jerry giving a shout of triumph as the boat shot across the smooth stream pursued by the roar of the rapids as by the cry of a bafled tiger.

With Harry's aid Ben's prize was now lifted on board. It was indeed Pete, tied hand and foot, and with a broad bandage drawn tightly around his mouth.

A moment sufficed to free him from his bonds, and he made the first use of his liberty to stand up and take a long look at the peril just passed.

"Golly, but dat were a high ole jump down-hill!" he exclaimed. "Lucky my mouf was tied up so tight, or I mought a-swallered more water'n I wanted. It's ole Marse Preston dat's done this, folkses, an' if ye's arter him he's done struck 'cross country fer de hills, hours an' hours ago."

"And what made you lay there, like a log, in the bottom of the boat?" growled Joe.

"Coz I were tied down. Jess's much 's I could do to git my head up. Got loose when de ole boat was jabbered inter toothpicks; but Jiminy! I t'ought it were all day with Pete."

"No use standin' here," said Jerry. "We kin leave the boat. It'll be safe. We've got to strike back fur that chap's trail. I'd gin' a cow to go on that b'ar-hunt to-day; but ef we kin run down this wild-cat it's 'bout as good. Let's strike out."

In five minutes more they were making their way, on the back track through the woods.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHT WITH THE BEAR.

It is about time that we were returning to the perilous position in which we left Mark Preston, tried by Jerry Prime's bear, and in terror at what he deemed the appearance of Will Wildfire's ghost. He trembled so that he with difficulty prevented himself from falling into the jaws of the patient bear.

As for the two men who had just discovered him, some strange thoughts passed through their minds.

A short, grim laugh broke from Pierce's lips.

"By all that's good," he exclaimed, "but our rat is caught in a neat trap. I move we back out of the quarrel, and leave him and the bear to settle it. Between you and me, I'd sooner see the bear get the best of the fight."

"I don't see why I should put myself in danger to help him," Will replied.

"Here, Sport! Here, you little fool! You'll be cured in a hurry if that chap gets a paw on you. Here, Carlo!"

The dogs, who were barking furiously around the bear, which had reared itself on its hind legs in readiness to receive them, reluctantly obeyed this stern call. The irate animal followed them a few steps, fixing its ferocious eyes on their master. But as they withdrew with the dogs, the bear returned instantly to its station under the tree, evidently thinking that a bird in the bush was worth two upon the wing.

The involuntary prisoner had made a hasty movement toward the trunk of the tree during this diversion, with the hope of a possible escape from all his foes. But this hope died out at the return of the bear.

The villain's feelings of superstition had vanished in an instant. He realized in a second thought that they were living men that he saw, and he again piteously appealed for help as he beheld them disappearing in the bushes. But they walked on, heedless of his cries, and were soon hidden by the tall stems of the thicket.

As for the animal it seemed to hesitate between two opinions. Now it took a few steps, in its rolling gait, toward the bushes, now returned and gazed wistfully up the tree, licking its red chops as if it fancied it was being very badly treated.

Its next movement was toward Mark Preston's rifle, which lay uselessly on the ground. This the bear picked up in its sharp teeth, and spitefully battered it against the tree.

Dropping the weapon the animal took another greedy observation of its foe. He was now on the thick part of the limb, near the trunk. Just what thoughts passed through the bear's mind we will not venture to interpret, but the next moment he clasped the tree-trunk, and began to make a lumbering ascent.

Another piteous cry for help came from the lips of the unhappy man, at this new move of his foe. He hastily scrambled back again to the slender part of the branch, followed by the bear, which had now gained the limb. Step by step the cautious creature advanced, clinging firmly to the bough, while Mark caught an upper limb for support, and made his way out to where the wood was perilously weak.

The bough, indeed, was bending dangerously under its double load. With his habitual caution the bear carefully paused at each movement to test its effect upon the limb. He stopped, at length, on finding that it swayed down at a perilous angle. Only about three feet separated the fugitive and his pursuer, who remained crouched upon the branch, his small, fierce eyes fixed eagerly upon his prey, while the open jaws showed a row of uncomfortably sharp teeth.

Mark Preston looked despairingly down. He was twenty feet from the ground; too far to risk a fall. He tried, by swaying the limb, to shake off the brute; but Bruin clung firmly, and seemed rather to enjoy the exercise. He next looked eagerly for the men who had so coldly retreated, leaving him in his bitter peril.

"Cowards!" he exclaimed. "Dastards! To leave a man exposed to so cruel a death! Punish me if you will; but save me, oh, save me, from this fate!"

The reader must not suppose that Pierce Browning and Will Wildfire had any serious thought of abandoning the wretch to the jaws of the bear. Their only idea was to punish him severely for his attempted crime. They were, in fact, now hidden behind the thicket, out of sight from their foe, but able to see, through chinks in the bushes, all that was going on.

"By Jove, there's a situation!" cried Pierce. "He's trying to shake the bear down; but Sir Bruin ain't that sort of an apple. He doesn't let go his hold so easily. It is just as neat a bit of retribution as the day you horsewhipped him at the games."

"Had we not better go to his rescue?" asked Will. "I don't want to see the bear quite get him."

"No, no, you soft-hearted boy. Let them have it out. He is good for a half-hour yet. Wait till you see his hair begin to turn white with the scare. It will be time enough then to try our hands at a bear-hunt."

It was fun, for those who could look upon it in that light, to see the conflict between Mark and the bear. In his despair he delivered a furious kick at the animal. The alert creature caught the boot with his ready paw, and made a vigorous effort to pull Mark toward him. Bruin, failing in this, conveyed the boot to his jaws, and began to gnaw at it. Only by quickly jerking his foot out of the captured leather did Mark save his flesh and bones from being subjected to the same fate as the boot.

Bruin contentedly gnawed away for a while, at his prize; not for an instant removing his eyes from the trembling prisoner, whom he hoped to serve in the same way before long.

"Come, come," said Will, his sense of humanity growing stronger than his desire for revenge. "Hadn't we better go to his rescue? You heard me give us the privilege to punish him in what way we would, if we only saved him from the bear."

"I fancy he is pretty severely punished already," laughed Pierce, as he picked up his gun. "I haven't had as sweet a morsel of satisfaction for a year."

Come on, then. I judge this must be the last bear of the mountains. It is undoubtedly the same one that Jerry Prime spoke of yesterday. We might as well have the honor of killing him."

"If he don't turn the tables, and obtain the glory of killing one of us," returned Will, examining the charge of his rifle. "I wish you had brought something of more use than a shot-gun."

"I will tickle him, anyhow, with a load of buckshot," replied Pierce, as he drew the charges of his gun, and reloaded it. "She shoots hard, as my shoulder can attest. I may hurt his feelings."

A cry of joy burst from the quaking prisoner of the bear, as he saw his hoped-for rescuers again approach. The animal saw them also, and at once began to back down from the limb, with awkward haste.

As he could reach the ground he was attacked by the uncontrollable dogs, who barked madly about him, sinking their teeth in his shaggy hide.

"Here, Carlo! Here, Sport!" yelled Pierce. "Here, you fools! He will tear you into ribbons, if he once gets his paws on you. Ware, Sport!"

His warning was too late for the younger dog; for the bear, the instant he touched the ground, struck the incautious brute with a quick dab from his well-armed paw. The yelping hound rolled helplessly over, and was instantly caught in the crushing hug of the infuriated beast.

"It is all over with Sport," Will sorrowfully remarked. "It is a pity; for he had the making of a good dog. Shall I revenge him by a bullet?"

"Are we near enough, do you think?"

"I could hit a crown piece at that distance." "Take him just back of the ear, then. That ought to find a vital spot."

Carlo, warned by the fate of his companion, was barking at the brute from a distance. Bruin now dropped the torn body of the younger dog, and made a hasty assault upon his new foe, disconcerting the careful aim which Will was taking.

"Hold on!" cried Pierce. "Our lives may depend upon that bullet. I will tickle him with buckshot."

Er Will could object he had fired. The animal, slightly wounded, and furiously enraged, turned from the pursuit of the dog, and made a rapid dash toward those whom he recognized as his most dangerous foes. It was a critical moment. The bear was one of the largest of his species, and was no trifling foe to deal with. Only the single bullet in Will's rifle stood between the two young men and imminent peril.

Yet neither had ever seemed less nervous. Will stood like an oak post, erect and firm, with his eye firmly fixed on the dangerous foe, waiting with enforced patience for the proper moment to fire.

Not ten paces now separated them. The bear was making straight for him. The rifle was at his shoulder with deadly aim; his finger pressed the trigger—and at this critical instant Carlo made a furious snap at the bear's flank, causing him to quickly turn his head.

It was an unlucky move. Will's bullet, instead of traversing the brain of the fierce brute, struck him behind the shoulder, making a severe but not disabling wound.

Quickly turning again, the wounded brute sprung furiously at his foe, who only saved himself by a hasty backward leap. It was a moment of imminent danger. Pierce still had a second barrel loaded with buckshot. Without an instant's hesitation he advanced until the muzzle touched the brute's ear, and pulled the trigger.

At that short distance the shot had deadly effect. The animal fell heavily upon its side, and lay prostrate for a moment, during which Will was hastily seeking to reload his weapon.

But with a sudden accession of strength and fury it sprung again to its feet, and advanced on Pierce, who had incautiously remained too near to avoid this unexpected assault.

In an instant the wounded brute was upon its hind legs, and had caught Pierce in its furious embrace.

Now was there peril indeed. The hug of a full-grown black bear is no trifling matter, to say the least. But Bruin had caught a Tartar in Pierce Browning. The gigantic form and immense muscular strength of the young man made him something of a match for his antagonist.

In an instant he had the brute by the throat, keeping off its glittering teeth, and choking him with a vice-like grip, while he administered resounding kicks on the creature's side with his heavy boots.

It was not, however, a comfortable situation for himself. The keen claws of the animal had already half torn off his clothes, and were rending his flesh.

"Hold on a minute!" screamed Will, as he rammed down his charge with nervous haste, "and I will put a bullet through his head."

"Hold on?" returned Pierce, stoutly, "I can't do anything else than hold on. Leave me alone, and I will whip the bear yet."

The blood of the young giant was up, and it did seem as if he might come out victor in the contest, though at severe cost to himself, as the creature's claws were furiously rending his flesh.

But at this moment the sharp crack of a rifle resounded in the woods to the left. It was followed by the deep bay of hounds, and by a rush through the bushes.

The limbs of the bear instantly relaxed their hold, its head drooped over. With a quick jerk, Pierce tore himself loose from the weakened grip, and flung the animal furiously from him.

"Why didn't you leave me alone?" he angrily cried. "I would have choked him down in a minute more. When I go into a fight I like to have it out."

A loud laugh greeted his grumbling reception of his

Will Wildfire in the Woods.

release from the bear, and the two scouts, followed closely by Ben and Harry, rushed upon the scene.

"Sorry to have disturbed yer little fun," remarked Jerry. "But I've been hankerin' arter a shot at that b'ar; and when I seed you an' him tusslin' it looked to me like a good opportunity."

"You got a second ahead of me," said Will. "Things were getting too warm for fun. But you are badly wounded, Pierce. You are bleeding profusely. This must be looked after, at once."

"I'll cure my sores with the hide of that bear," returned Pierce. "I think I won it, in fair battle."

While Jerry, who professed a degree of surgical skill, was examining and preparing to bandage these wounds, Joe advanced toward the slain dog.

Suddenly he raised his rifle, and called out:

"Come back, there; blast you for a sneakin' hound! Quick, now, fore my finger gits nervous!"

These words were addressed to Mark Preston, who had taken the opportunity of the bear-fight to descend from the tree, and was hastily making off into the bushes.

"Back, consarn you!" growled Joe. "So ye treid him, hey; arter all our chasse?"

"The bear did," answered Will.

In a few hasty words he told the story of the affair, while Mark Preston reluctantly turned at this stern command, and slowly walked back toward his foes.

"Stand thar, now!" continued Joe. "Watch him, Tiger! We'll tend to you arter we git this gentleman in order."

With bit lips and pale face the captured villain silently awaited the completion of the surgical performance, a cowardly tremor shaking his whole frame.

It proved that Pierce had received no dangerous wounds, though the flesh had been badly torn on his legs and shoulders.

"What's to be done with this chap, now?" asked Joe, with a grim look at his prisoner.

"Oh! I fancy he has been well punished," said Will. "I have nothing more against him. The bear settled my score."

"And blamed near settled mine," grumbled Pierce. "That's all very well," replied Joe. "But there's a law of the woods as well as of the city. When yer murderin' devils come out yere to play the'r pranks, we wood folks like to hev a finger in the pie."

"Good for you," rejoined Pierce. "Give the hound a taste of backwoods law. Will is too tender-hearted."

"No lynching," said Will.

"Oh, no! Only a little keepsake to remember us by."

The others moved off, leaving Joe and Jerry alone with the prisoner.

On seeing this he sprung forward, making a piteous appeal not to be left in their hands.

"Stop that!" cried Joe, authoritatively. "We've got a trife of bizness with you."

The four friends walked on into the woods, paying no heed to this appeal.

An hour after they had reached the camp, Joe and Jerry came in, bringing with them the hide of the bear, which they had skillfully removed from the slain animal.

"Where is your prisoner?" asked Harry, curiously.

"Hobbld off, on one boot and one stockin'," answered Jerry.

"But what did you do with him?"

"Guy him the full law of Moses. Forty less one. And with a prime hickory switch. I'll bet that b'ar's hide that he wears plaster on his back for a good fortnight to come."

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ASSAULT IN FORCE.

The next day it rained. Camping out, however agreeable it may be in sunny weather, marvelously loses its attractions when dark clouds gather on the sky, chill winds roar through the forest, and heavy rains pour down upon the sodden ground. The genial warmth of the Indian summer sunshine changed to a shivering chill; the bright-colored autumn leaves, which still adorned many of the trees, fell, like a flight of migrating birds, before the winds; and a general chorus of discontent went up from our storm-stayed friends, who did not like confinement in tents.

It was particularly unpleasant to Pierce Brown-ing, who was now feeling the pain of the wounds which had troubled him little in yesterday's excitement.

"This is confoundedly uninteresting," he grumbled, as he rolled restlessly on his cot. "Ridiculously sharp finger and toe-nails that bear had. I won't be myself again for a month to come. Wish I was well in my own room at home, with a bottle of sherry and the morning paper, instead of in this wishy-washy, drippy, dreary bit of country. Hand me a cigar, Jack, and a light. A man must have some comfort."

While the invalid was striving to extract comfort from his cigar, Pete, squatted in the door of the tent, was indulging in similar lugubrious thoughts.

"Jess like 'em," he muttered. "Brung back my shoes an' jacket, but dey neber fotched one of dem waddies. Sif, that weren't nothin' in de world of no 'count 'cept shoes an' jackets? An' me tied up like a spring chicken; and floatin' down de riber jess like a stray chip; an' shootin' de rapids; or de rapids shootin' me; dunno which it were. Sure's you lib, I felt sif I been shot outer a seventy-five-pounder. An' now it's got to rain; an' I jes' spec dem catties is done sp'lied; an' I won't git another bite; an' I jes' wish I were home."

Pete's grumbling voice sunk to a lower tone, as a laugh behind him showed that his lamentations were exciting merriment in his audience.

"Dlaff myself ef I see'd anythin' to laff 'bout," continued the boy. "Yere we's got ter chaw hard-tack all day, coz we can't make no fire; and I clar to goodness dat I don't hanker arter no sich grub."

And the day passed gloomily enough to all, under the close walls of the tents, though they had more or less occupation in repairing damages.

Joe Smith had taken away the bear-skin to have it cured and prepared for stuffing, Pierce declaring that he was going to keep the counterfeit presentment of that black bear on a pedestal in his room, as a perpetual reminder to his friends that they had a Nimrod among them.

"By Jupiter, I have earned it!" he said. "I won't forget that bear for one good month to come. Ugh! how my shoulder hurts, and what an infernally dismal day it is! It's enough to give a saint the blue devils."

He lay back on his couch, puffing volumes of smoke from his cigar, as if there was nothing but smoke in the world worth living for.

The next day dawned bright and clear. The sun shone warmly on the sodden soil, rapidly drying its surface, while a thin mist filled the ambient air. The pleasure-seekers were early abroad, quite for getting the dismal gloom of the previous day. Their camping-out season was near its end, and they felt like making the most of the short period remaining.

As soon as the grass had sufficiently dried, Pierce seated himself in a camp chair at the tent door, with a pillow to sustain his back, smoking, and criticising the culinary labors of Jack Hasard in a style not very agreeable to that individual.

Of the others some went fishing and some shooting. Will started out on a tramp after woodcock, in company with Jerry Prime, that personage agreeing to lead him to a famous resort of that desirable game bird.

As for Pete he went a-fishing.

"Mought be some catties left thar," he soliloquized. "Ef that is I's bound to have a mess. Don't keer much fur pearch; dey's sich a berry common kind o' fish. Wouldn't guy one good catty fur a barrel of 'em."

Only Pierce, Jack Hasard, and Harry Waters, remained at the camp, Jack swearing that he was so rascally sick of wet-weather grub, that he was bound to have a first-class dinner that day, if he exhausted the powers of the cook-book.

Harry stayed with him as a necessary aid-de-camp, and Pierce because he was in no traveling trim.

"Where's that confounded young rascal, Pete?" growled Jack, as he found his firewood running short. "I hope the charcoal-visaged youth isn't out on another boating-club expedition. There's one thing sure, he is a genius for being out of the way when wanted."

"Yere's Pete; an' I's cotched Jess the nice mess of catties you ever see'd. Look dar; and den don't talk."

The boy held up proudly a string of large cat-fish, while his ebony face beamed with satisfaction.

"Dar's no use talkin'," he declared, "but a catty's de best fish goin'. An' when Pete drops his hook fur 'em dey know dey mought as well take holt. Dar ain't no gettin' away."

"Let us have them, Pete," said Jack. "Fried cat-fish are not bad provender, that's a fact."

"The'r scroungers," declared Pete, as he brought forward his string of fish. "Neber see'd sich beauties. Who do you t'ink's dat comin' down de hill yander?"

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

"How's that, Pete?" asked Harry.

"A kerridge; sure's you lib. I cotched sight of 't way up dar, 'bove de woods. Comin' down yere, suah."

"I hope it is not lady company," remarked Jack. "We haven't got what I call prime accommodations for the ladies."

"Let them come; we'll set them to cooking," answered Pierce. "Of all the animals out of a place in the world a man turned cook is the worst."

"Growl on. You're privileged," retorted Jack, slicing away at his venison steaks.

Harry meanwhile, with the aid of Pete, set himself diligently to work in cleaning up the camp, in preparation for a possible inroad of ladies.

"I don't see where in the world they could come from, or who they could be," he said, "but if they are traveling here I don't want to have them making game of our housekeeping. There's nothing under the sun can beat a woman, in seeing a hole through a ladder, or a speck in a pigeon's eye. Stir up there, Pete! It's cl'arin' up 'time.'

He soon had matters in a somewhat more presentable condition, though it is very probable that an accomplished housekeeper might have suggested some improvements.

"Let them come now," he remarked, with a sigh of relief. "We're spick and span clean."

In a few minutes afterward the sound of wheels was heard, and it was not long before a carriage rolled into view, coming carefully down the rude mountain road. This road, in fact, was little more than a narrow cart track through the woods, and it was very doubtful if it had ever been invaded before by any vehicle worthy of the name of carriage. Yet this was a stylish barouche, drawn by four spirited horses, and revealing, even at a distance, the bright and smiling faces of a bevy of young ladies.

It stopped opposite the camp, Harry Waters running briskly forward, while Pierce contented himself with slewin' his chair around in that direction, and Jack stood, with sleeves rolled up and ladle in hand, looking toward the new-comers with a grim frown.

"If it's dinner they want," he growled, "I'm afear'd somebody's going to have short rations."

With a rich chorus of laughter the ladies descended from the carriage, accepting Harry's proffered aid.

"Miss Moreland!" he exclaimed. "Miss Darling! This is too good of you. Let me help you, ladies," holding out his hand to two others, whose names were unknown to him. "Why our camp will be like a nest of sunbeams. What ever put it into your heads?"

A chorus of laughing responses followed his words.

"We were bound to take you by surprise." "We wanted to see in what heathen way you were living here." "It is only a delegation of the archery club come to pay you a visit." "Have ridden over from Pottsville, through the mountains."

The clatter of happy tongues soon became too lively to distinguish just what they were saying, as they advanced in column on the camp.

"Mr. Browning!" cried several of the ladies in concert. "And has not moved out of his chair! Well, this is gallant!"

"Glad to see you, ladies. But, as Jack Hasard has just said, I am privileged."

"Jack! Grim old Jack!" and there was a flutter of bright dresses in that direction. "Cooking! Well, I'll declare! Oh! do come and look here! Do come and look! Oh! what a sight for a housekeeper!"

"Now make tracks, if you don't want to be scalded!" grumbled Jack. "This spoon of mine gets a mighty awkward twist sometimes."

"Because it is in a mighty awkward hand," laughed Miss Darling. "Let me have it." And ere he could hinder her had ret it from his grasp, and was diligently stirring up the contents of his great iron pot.

"I don't know all that's in here," she cried. "Let me see. Potatoes, beef, barley, a regular combination. And mutton-chops and catfish in the same pan. Oh! did you ever?"

"Give me that spoon, or you'll be soup from head to foot," growled Jack. "Mutton-chops, indeed! It's as pretty a venison cutlet as was ever sliced. And as for the catfish, don't you see it's a double-barreled pan? They can't run together."

"Lay it onto him, ladies," laughed Pierce. "His shoulders are broad, but his sins are a legion."

"I do not see that your virtue goes very deep," said Clara, with a touch of sarcasm. "To do even leave your chair to receive your lady friends."

"You must excuse me, I am troubled with corns," replied Pierce, with a grimace, as a sharp pain shot through his shoulder.

"He's Jess a-foolin' you, Missy Clara. It's consider'able wuss nor dat," cried Pete, indignantly.

"What, Pete? You here? And I did not see you before!" exclaimed Clara. "But what is it then?"

"Nothing. Hold your tongue, boy," commanded Pierce.

"He's Jess been chawed up by a b'ar," persisted Pete. "Jess half eat up alive. Oh, lawsee, Missy Clara! It's jiss monstrosus de way he was chawed. Wants to make out it's corns! Tain't no corns, now!" and Pete's voice had a ring of deep indignation.

"Bitten by a bear!" the cries of sympathy rose almost into screams. They huddled around Pierce with warm earnest questions, and tender expressions of feeling and interest, and we must admit a degree of curiosity, until he felt that he was being half smothered by the warmth of their sympathy.

"Oh! it is nothing, ladies," he exclaimed despairingly. "Just don't press so close, I pray you. Pete's a little humbug. Got scratched a bit, that's all."

But they were bound not to be satisfied so readily as that. They plied him and Harry and Jack with a multitude of questions, and would not be satisfied until they had heard the whole story of the bear-hunt, and knew precisely the part that Pierce had borne in it.

"Of course we did not see it all," said Harry. "When we came up Pierce and the bear were having a free fight. They were hugging each other like two wrestlers or two lovers, whichever you prefer. And between us all I hardly know which was getting the worst of it, Pierce or the bear. However, we settled the animal, by a bullet through its head. But all we got for our pains from this champion bear-fighter, was a scolding that we did not let him have it out."

If the nonchalant giant had never been a hero in his life before he was decidedly one then, and for the next half-hour was overwhelmed with praises, congratulations, and pity for his wounds from his fair assailers.

"But when are you going to have dinner?" asked Miss Darling. "There is nothing like a mountain ride for the appetite, you know, and we're most famished."

"I didn't provide for such an addition to the camp," replied Jack. "You will have to take short rations."

"I don't fear that, with your immense potful. Besides we can provide you with dessert. We did not come empty-handed."

With the assistance of Pete she soon extracted certain jars and packages from the carriage, whose contents were speedily displayed upon the table, which the other ladies were diligently setting.

"Preserves! jellies! fruits! Gracious me! won't our friends be surprised when they come in!" exclaimed Harry, as the contents of the packages successively appeared.

That they would be surprised was a mild term for it. When, a half-hour afterward, Will emerged from the forest with a half-dozen of woodcock, and Ben Huntly and Phil Carson with a bag full of quail, they were astonished at first by the musical laughter that came to them through the trees. But they were overwhelmed on catching sight of the woodland table, surrounded by a laughing bevy of girls.

beauties. And they were utterly astounded on seeing who their fair visitors were, and by the babel of congratulations with which they were met.

"It's a special occasion," cried Will. "Venison and catfish don't half express it. Here's quail! here's woodcock! Put them on the spit! We must greet our visitors with all the honors."

CHAPTER XV.

WILL WILDFIRE'S TARGET.

MEANWHILE the driver of the barouche had drawn his carriage into a clear place amid the trees, unharnessed the horses, and tethered them where they could get a feast of the rich grass, which grew so luxuriantly in the vicinity.

"We must be back so as to reach Coalville by night," explained Clara, "for it is very plain that your hotel has all its rooms occupied. But we want you to amuse us this afternoon. That is what we came here for, and we are not going away unsatisfied."

"Just tell us all that you have been doing, and what sport you've had, and—and—all of that," exclaimed Miss Darling enthusiastically. "Of course you've had adventures. There's too many of you, and too great reprobates, not to have a host of queer things to tell us."

"Can we have the privilege of drawing on our imaginations?" asked Pierce.

"No, sir! The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Pierce had a deeply interested audience around his chair, as he described the sport and earnest of their camping-out life. The danger Will had gone through changed, for a while, the current of their sympathies, and he was overwhelmed with congratulations on his escape. The next victim of sympathy was Pete, when the story of his boating expedition came out. And the story ended with the merriment that greeted Mark Preston's adventure with the bear, and the thrilling interest attending Pierce Browning's great bear-hugging match.

"Oh, dear me! what and what you have gone through with!" exclaimed Miss Darling, her blue eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "And what a charming life it must be, out here under the trees and in the sunlight, and with plenty to eat, and nothing to do but to have adventures. I move that we ladies start a camp too, somewhere in this wild region."

"But we have no guns to shoot partridges and deer; and I don't believe one of us would be of any use in a bear fight," said one of the other ladies, with a look of admiration at Pierce.

"We have our bows and arrows," returned Clara. "That is all that Robin Hood and his gallant men had, to live by. And, by the way, we have brought them with us. We thought that we could have some archery practice out here in the wild woods."

She ran quickly to the carriage, and returned laden with an armful of bows and arrows.

"Yes," exclaimed Miss Darling enthusiastically. "I want to see Mr. Wildfire shoot. He escaped the last time, by shooting a man's hat off in the thicket. But we will not let him off that easy."

"And Mr. Browning," cried another lady. "He did not try to shoot, that day."

"Now I cry your pardon," exclaimed Pierce, with affected dismay. "If you have a barn door, at ten paces, it is possible I could hit it. But I would not like to expose myself on anything smaller."

"Here is your target," and Harry snatched up a broad brimmed straw hat, the property of Jack Hasard. "We will see what Will can do at hat shooting to-day. The crown is the bull's-eye, and the brim the outer circles, mind you. And whoever hits the nail carries away the honors."

He seized a hammer and nail, and ran out to a tree at some distance, followed by a roar from Jack.

"Stop thief! Come back here with that hat, you rascally burglar, or I'll chop you into mince-meat and make an Irish stew of you! Do you suppose I have no other use for my Mackinaws but to make targets of them?"

"Oh! dry up! You've worn it six years now, to my certain knowledge," retorted Harry, as he drove in the nail through the center of the crown. "It wants ventilating."

"Well, if this isn't a high-handed proceeding!" exclaimed Jack, flourishing his ladle. "But go ahead, if I must be made the victim of my good nature. There's this comfort—there's not a soul of you can send an arrow within three feet of it at that distance."

"Don't be too sure, misguided man," returned Clara, quickly drawing the bow to which she had just fitted an arrow.

The feathered shaft whizzed through the air, so close to Jack's ear that he made a hasty leap back. In a minute more it had struck the rim of the hat, passing quite through, and making a wide rent an inch long.

"Oh, my fated Mackinaw!" groaned Jack. "But it was a chance shot. I believe yet that my safest place would be with my head inside that hat."

"Yes, if you can't keep it out of the way here," exclaimed Miss Darling, maliciously sending another arrow past Jack's other ear, but very wide of the target.

"I assure you, young ladies, that you are laboring under a mistake," he cried, hiding himself quickly behind a tree. "It is my hat that is the target—not my head. I hope you will be kind enough to remember that interesting fact."

"But, good heavens!" returned Pierce, "what is to be done? Your ears are so large that it is almost impossible to miss them. You have your right ear severed; but I would advise you to hide your left

ear behind another tree. I am going to shoot now, and I want a chance to see the target."

"Go on," exclaimed Jack. "I am a victim, I always was a victim, and I suppose I always will be a victim. Go on, if you think there is no hereafter."

A general laugh followed, during which Pierce drew the bow, as well as he could in his sitting position, and let fly an arrow. It struck a sapling about ten feet to the left of the target, and stood vibrating in the tender bark.

"And they call that shooting!" groaned Jack, while Pete ran off to gather up the spent arrows. "But my hat's safe, that's some comfort. Lucky for me they made it a target. If it was hanging anywhere else, within twenty feet of the center, they would be sure to hit it."

"Don't cry before you are out of the brambles," replied Ben Huntly, who had now taken up the bow. "It takes a few shots to get the range, you know. I'll bet you a new Mackinaw I hit it."

"Make it a beaver, and it is done. Mackinaws are out of season."

"Done," cried Ben, as he drew the bow-string with a strong and skillful hand.

The arrow flew, striking the rim of the hat near its former wound, and with such force that the straw was rent asunder, and hung dangling downward.

"Oh, the deuce!" roared Jack. "And here I have to find this fellow in a new beaver as a payment for tearing my hat. That's what comes of gambling."

His assumed distress was followed by a roar of laughter. Several well-aimed shots succeeded, to the sad detriment of the hat, whose brim was now hanging in ribbons, while one arrow quivered in the outer edge of the crown.

"Will Wildfire! Will Wildfire!" cried several voices. "It is his turn now. He is trying to avoid shooting."

"Why I wasn't educated on a target like that," said Will, in a quiet tone, as he stepped forward. "We did a little archery work at college, I admit; but not at old hats."

"Old hats indeed!" cried Jack. "And I bought it new for this trip. It has hardly been christened."

"At what sort of a target, then?" asked Miss Darling.

"Oh! we used to split arrows on open knife-blades, and shoot the eyes out of potatoes; and that sort of thing," replied Will nonchalantly, as he tried the bow, and snapped the silken string.

"Yes, that sort of thing, no doubt," rejoined Pierce, with an incredulous smile. "You are a prime hand at that sort of thing. I hit the sapling there to the right. It will be a miracle if you don't hit the one to the left."

"Wait, first, until I drive that nail further in," responded Will.

He had lifted the bow, grasping it in most archer-like fashion. It was a tough piece of ash, yet Will bent it with apparent ease, his eyes glancing along the arrow, whose feathered shaft touched his ear.

A moment's silence and expectancy followed the twang of the bow-string, and the whistling flight of the arrow.

"I haven't quite got the feel of that bow," Will quietly said. "I have a fancy, though, that you will find my arrow not two inches away from the nail."

His words were echoed by the clang of iron on iron. Their eyes opened wide as the keen point of the arrow rung upon the exposed head of the nail, and the shaft flew back upon the ground.

"It's chance! Pure chance!" exclaimed Jack. "You couldn't do it again, for a thousand!"

"Don't as me to rob you," laughed Will. "Such a target, at such a distance! Why it would be sheer burglary! Wait till I find a target worthy my fame."

He walked off toward the woods as he spoke, carrying the bow, and the blunted arrow, which he picked up as he passed.

"I will go with you. There needs some witness of this wonderful shot," and Clara ran laughing after him.

"I had no idea you could shoot so," she continued, after they had gone some distance into the forest.

"Neither had I," laughed Will. "It was two-thirds chance. But I am not green hand enough to shoot again, and give them the opportunity to find that out. When one has gained a crop of glory he may as well hold on to it."

They walked on, through the interminable woods, all thought of archery passing from their minds as softer thoughts intruded, while their voices sunk, and their eyes glowed with warm feeling.

A half-hour afterward found them seated on the fallen trunk of a forest monarch, around which the trees had heaped their leafy burdens, while new showers of colored leaves dropped steadily upon the earth.

"How softly and silently they fall," he thoughtfully remarked. "They are like rich thoughts, or like words of love dropped from heart to heart. Have you forgotten, Clara, that evening by your cheerful fireside?"

"I shall never forget it," she replied, warmly pressing his hand. "It did not need what I heard then from your lips, dear Will. I always knew you loved me."

"From the time you led me such a chase," he softly answered. "From the evening of the masked ball."

"Ah! I am ahead of you then, for I more than half fell in love with you on the day of the boat-race when you so gallantly came in first at the goal."

"I can see your face now, looking over the cliff," he quickly responded. "And this soft hand that dropped me the flowers. I have some of them yet, Clara."

"Oh, you romantic rogue! How terribly faded they must be. I hope your love will never be like them."

"Never. The Wildfire love is a hot fire, but it is a steady one, dear Clara. Its flame does not easily go out."

His arm slid quietly around her slender waist. She was drawn closely to his breast, while his lips were pressed on hers in a warm kiss.

For a minute she lay thus, inexpressibly happy in his embrace. Then she looked upward, with a soft sigh, her eyes bent upon the distant depths of the forest.

Suddenly, with a hasty ejaculation of terror, she sprung to her feet and threw her arms impulsively around him.

"Ah, good Heaven!" she cried. "No, no! me first, if one must die!"

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Will, in quick alarm, as he sought to rise.

But their voices were drowned in a sharp report, that seemed to come from a bushy clump a few paces to the left. Clara fell upon Will's breast, her arms convulsively clasping him.

"Ah, my God! I am shot!" she exclaimed. "It is he! Mark—Ma-k Preston! Ah! Heaven be thanked; it is my life, not yours!"

A rustling sound was audible in the thicket; Will's quick eye caught a hasty glimpse of a retreating figure. With an impulsive movement, he caught up the bow and arrow that lay by his side, and, despite the dear burden that lay upon his breast, discharged almost a random shot in the direction of the flying fugitive.

A cry of pain followed the impulsive shot. Then all was silence.

With a sudden revulsion from revengeful thoughts Will's eyes fell upon the pallid face and closed eyes of the poor girl in his arms, who had so bravely offered her life for his.

"Speak to me, Clara!" he cried. "Say—say that you are not dead! Ah! I shall never forgive myself if this dastardly shot prove fatal!"

"You are not to blame, dear Will," whispered Clara, striving to smile, though her lips were set with pain. "I have always feared we both would die by this man's hand."

"It is his last shot!" cried Will, with blazing eyes. "I will have his blood in revenge! Oh, my God! can she be slain? Can she have died, and I standing idly by?"

Clasping her impulsively in his arms, he ran with the speed of a deer toward the camp.

Those who remained there, and who were still amusing themselves with archery, were suddenly aroused by his wild cries, in which plaintive lamentation was mingled with bursts of tiger-like fierceness.

A dozen quick words told what had happened, and spread terror and dismay through the lately happy camp.

"Quick, put in the horses!" he screamed. "You take the carriage, Ben. Drive like mad for the nearest town. Have a doctor here within an hour, if you kill all the horses. Pierce, you know something of surgery. Ah! if she be slain! if she be slain!"

He surrendered her into the arms of the aghast ladies, to whom only the short and stern commands of Pierce gave any power of action.

"It is serious," he announced, after a hasty examination, "but may not be fatal. The ball has gone in below the shoulder. But it seems to have entered at an angle. It may have reached no vital organ."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Will, fervently. "And now, Jerry, Harry, Jack, revenge is the word! He cannot have gone far! The wet leaves will carry his trail! Shall he again escape?"

"No!" came in a general stern chorus, while every hand reached for a rifle, or other deadly weapon.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WORK OF AN ARROW.

JERRY PRIME had his one eye fixed closely upon the ground, while the others stood by in breathless suspense.

"Daylight isn't plainer," he muttered, as he cast his glance from right to left. "Yere's whar the murderin' hound stood. And by the seven blessed candles, yer arre went home!—see yander. Them aren't nat'ral colored leaves. It was a man's blood as made them red spots."

"And here is the arrow itself," exclaimed Jack, as he groped in the depth of the thicket. "Its point covered with blood. It's a pity it was blunted by the former shot. It might have stopped his fun for good, only for that."

"Dug in an inch as it were," replied Jerry, critically examining the crimsoned point. "Stuck fast too. He jerked it out and flung it over thar. Come ahead, boys, every minut' counts. A cow could foler this trail."

Will, who had stood with lowering face and contracted brows, grasping his rifle till it seemed as if his fingers would meet in the rigid iron, started at these words and eagerly prepared to follow their experienced guide.

"Keep back now, Nebby" commanded the scout. "We aren't axing any duty from your nose. Ye'd jest be as like, anyhow, to lead us arter a rabbit as arter a man. Keep back, I say. We'll call on you when we want you."

With his long stride the scout walked forward, as if he were following a street in the city instead of a man's footsteps through the depths of the forest.

Yet any one there might have followed that trail at full speed. The hard rain of the previous day had soaked the leaves, only their upper layer being

dried by that day's sun. In consequence, every step of the fugitive had left a deep impression upon the thick bed of fallen leaves, whose rain-soaked state had destroyed their elasticity.

The way led straight onward toward the mountain, but turned on reaching its slope and ran along the edge of the declivity in the direction of a glen leading through the hills.

"He run till he got here," said Jerry, stopping beside a mountain ash, and again closely inspecting the ground. "But he were bleedin' more nor were comf'able. Yere's whar he stopped to tie up his hurt. Don't ye see how he's tried to play it on us, kickin' leaves over the blood-drops? That arer of yurn hit him sore, Mr. Wildfire. It's a lame bird we're follerin'."

"Would that it had reached his dastardly heart!" and Will's face grew dark with rage. "But why do we stop here? Why delay an instant in our pursuit?"

"Softly, softly!" came Jerry's cool reply. "Slow and sure is the best traveler. Any p'int missed now might fling us off the track in the end."

Jerry, after a minute's further delay, started again on the trail, followed closely by the dog, and less immediately by his three human followers.

"Was he still running?" asked Harry, as he strove to read the indications of the footprints.

"No," answered Jerry. "He dropped to a fast walk. It's a good stride yet, but the tracks are shorter and lighter."

The trail had now entered the valley, which led up between two swelling hills, which scarcely deserved the name of mountain.

The ax of the woodcutter had never entered this primeval forest. The sloping elevations were covered to their summits with thick growing trees, while in the valley, watered and fertilized by a gurgling streamlet, huge pines, oaks, and poplars lifted their sturdy forms heavenward, some of them being of immense girth, while a new growth of slender saplings filled the intervals between the monarchs of the forest.

Much of this space was clear of obstructions, though an occasional thicket of brambles or clumps of undergrowth made the way difficult. Here and there, too, reposed the half-decayed trunks of older trees, the relics of some past storm, closing the passage with the bushes which had clustered thickly around them.

"He were in some'at of a hurry," announced Jerry, as he led on. "Straight through bushes and over dead trees. A crow couldn't fly in a straighter line. Ah! that's a change in the programme. He walked round that dead trunk."

"Did he think he had distanced pursuit?" asked Harry.

"Not he," returned Jerry. "That weren't the trouble. Wait a bit. The thing is gettin' kinder curvy hereaway."

He walked more slowly, his single but very sharp eye intently reading the indications of the trail.

"Yes, yes," he announced, after some five minutes of this quiet progress. "It's conside'ble as I pected. That arer hit him heavy. We've got him, sure's ever a cat got a mouse. Ye hit the nail ag'in, Mr. Wildfire. I'll s'war to that."

"What do you mean?" asked Will, eagerly pressing forward.

"He's gettin' weaker every step. Ain't no more tree-jumpin' in him. And see yere! He set down on this stump fur a rest, and to try and wrap up his hurt ag'in. It weren't done bleedin' yit. Yere's a spot on the bark."

"It seems a shame for four hearty chaps like us to be running down a single wounded creature; even if he is of the wild-cat genus," ventured Harry, with a feeling of shame.

"Don't you be gettin' no soft notions of that sort," retorted Jerry. "Tain't no wild-cat we're arter, but a mighty cunnin' human. He ain't cotched yit, by a jugful. So fur he's been trustin' to his legs. From this p'int on ye'll find that he trusts to his brains. We won't foller the trail quite so lively, ye'll see that."

"The ship is flinging her cargo overboard," returned Jack, who had been looking through the bushes. "She's lightening weight for a sharp run. See here!"

He held in his hand a rifle which he had just found in the thicket.

Jerry examined it carefully.

"Light weight, but looks like a good tool," he said. "That's the indentical rifle that the poor gal was shot with. The infernal catamount ain't took time to load it ag'in. Yere's the old cap on the nipple yit."

Will snatched the weapon from his hand, and looked at it for a minute with lowering face. He then flung it fiercely to the ground, a revengeful expression darkening his countenance.

"Lead on!" he hoarsely commanded. "Ah! that I had that villain in my hands, as I have just had his murderous weapon! I could tear him limb from limb!"

Without a word of reply Jerry again took the trail, his face reflecting some of the revengeful fury which burned on Will's ingenuous countenance.

The scout now led in a sloping line toward the narrow stream, which flowed through the center of the valley. Without hesitation he crossed it, and continued his course on the other side.

The character of the soil was changing. The rich loam of the lower valley became a hard, clayey soil, through which rocks here and there protruded, while the huge trees below were here replaced by a feebler growth. A short distance further on a rocky stratum broke through. Broad shelves of a slaty rock were interspersed with narrower reaches of soil, in which the few trees of this locality had taken root. In this

open space the sun had more thoroughly dried the surface, so that the trail became less distinct.

"Now legs has giv up the game, and brains has took their place," announced Jerry. "Ther's on'y one thing fur us. We've got to put our own brains to work."

His former rapid progress was succeeded by a slow, cautious, doubtful movement, his gaze fixed earnestly upon the earth.

"The hound's makin' every use of the rocks," he continued. "He's stepped from one to t'other wherever he could. Keep yer eyes open, gentlemen. Ye might catch the trail whar it 'scapes me. Thar's no tellin' what backin' and fillin' sich a chap is up to. Not too eager. Softly, softly! Be keefur 'bout puttin' yer own feet on the site. Ye might make trouble."

In fact the shelving rocks approached, in many places, near enough to step from one to the other, and the fugitive had evidently made skillful use of this opportunity. Jerry found, in several of the broader reaches of soil, traces of his feet. But the soil itself grew hard and dry as they advanced, and finally every vestige of the trail disappeared. The scout made a careful but vain search of the whole locality.

"I told yer we hadn't no fool to deal with," he grumbled. "Mebbe, though, the dog's nose might be keener nor our eyes. Sick 'em, Nebby! Go fur 'em, honey! See what you kin make of it."

The dog, at this appeal to his sagacity, sprung forward with a short bark, and began to run backward and forward with his nose to the ground.

"Further out, lad! Beyant the stones! See ef ye can't pick up a scent in the grass," and Jerry followed the circling animal to the outer soil, which he searched closely, while the dog ran in widening circles.

The animal suddenly stopped with a whining bark, and looked questioningly up in his master's face.

"No, no, Nebby, tain't rabbits," said Jerry, with a shake of his head, though he stepped up to satisfy himself that the dog had not really found the trail. "It's two-legged game, Nebby. No sich small fry as rabbits."

The dog, as if understanding him, continued his search.

Jerry's companions had done their utmost to aid in this investigation, but without any satisfactory result. They now stood anxiously watching the movements of the dog. Jerry walked up to them, and rested his weight upon his rifle, as he watched for another minute the dog's fruitless search.

"It's 'bout as I thought," he at length said, in a half soliloquy. "The rat's took to the water. S'pected so from the fust, but didn't keer to leave this spot 'till we worked it out."

A quick start passed through his hearers at these words. They turned and looked at the stream, which ran through the center of this rocky stratum.

"His steps lead away from it," continued Jerry. "But that's a stale trick. He could reach it from here by the rocks, 'thout 'teching a morsel of sile. Runnin' water leaves no trail; but he can't git outer the water 'cept by the land, and we've got to look now fur whar he left it."

He walked to the border of the shallow stream, and looked intently upon the waters.

"Has he gone up or down?" asked Harry.

"That's what I'm cogeratin'. Won't pay us now to take the wrong track. Is' picion severely, though, that he's struck up."

"Why?" asked Jack, who could see nothing in the water leading to such a conclusion.

"Cause the water ain't as clear as it oughter be. It's generally like glass, an' now ye can scarce see the bottom. Ther's somethin' stirred the mud upstream, and not long ago nuther. Come here, Nebby. No use wastin' your precious time, yander."

He whistled for the dog, and started up the stream, followed by the others.

"You folks had best take t'other side," he advised. "He's left the water ag'in some'at up yere, and we've got to hev sharp eyes on the sile."

The pursuit continued in deep silence for nearly a half-mile, every eye intently watching the banks of the stream, while the dog ran eagerly to right and left with his nose fixed to the ground.

At the point which they had now reached the water came through a narrow, rocky channel, and then suddenly widened and shallowed over a flat bed of clayey soil.

Jerry paused and laid down his rifle, stooping over the waters. He shook his head after a minute.

"Too thick," he said. "I'll hev to make a dam."

The stiff clay of the bottom served him in this quandary. Two or three handfuls pressed in the narrow rock channel stopped the flow of the stream, only some slight rills trickling through. These he stopped with a fresh application of his natural mortar, and then waited patiently until the flowing stream should empty the shallow basin below the dam.

They had but a minute to wait. The stream quickly ran out, showing the bare bottom of the channel, except where sundry depressions remained filled with water. A dry smile came on Jerry's weather-beaten face as he pointed downward.

"Don't talk!" he remarked. "It's as plain now as the nose on Nebby's face. D'y'e see them water-logged holes? Them was made by a man's boots. And it's the man we are arter. I know the track to a hair."

It needed no keen eyes to recognize the shape of human foot in the depressions in the stiff clay, made so recently that the water had yet hardly worn away their sharp edges.

"It's gettin' warm," remarked Jerry, as he started forward again. "Tain't half an hour since he passed yere, and ye'll find he'll soon leave the wa-

ter. Use yer eyes sharp. A broken leaf mought tell the game on him now."

The stream now passed through a thick growth of bushes. Jerry forced a passage through the midst of these, bidding the others to pass around the outside, with a sharp look-out for the trail.

For perhaps a hundred yards this bushy growth continued, after which another stretch of stony soil succeeded.

"Yere's whar he left the water. As sure as you're living men," cried Jerry. "And to the left. The stones stretch further in that direction. No use huntin' through these stones, but we've got to investigate the outer edges mighty sharp, you bet."

The stony locality was about an eighth of a mile in breadth. Jerry walked straight to its borders, preceded by the dog, whose eagerness of search seemed increased.

After a few minutes the hound broke into a furious barking, running back to his master and forward again to a point in the forest.

But Jerry shook his head. He stood leaning upon his rifle, his eye fixed curiously on the ground.

"The chase is up," he announced to the others, who had gathered around him. "I fancied ther' was more work afore us; but it's all up. He's let go the rudder, and the ship's all adrift. That arer done the job."

They looked down without speaking at the point on which his eyes were fixed. There was indeed a most striking indication. For a broad patch of blood had crimsoned the surface of a flat stone, while a slight pool of the crimson fluid, not yet hardened, filled a depression in the stone.

"He couldn't go no further," said Jerry. "He stopped here to rest, and the bandage has slipped. It's no trifling wound that chap's got. I'd wager my old hat that the life blood's been touched."

He walked on, with his eyes to the ground, the others following.

"Trainin's easy when it gits to be a blood trail," he quietly remarked. "Look at the tell-tale drops, on stones and leaves. He hasn't had the strength to tie it up ag'in. Why he's been staggerin' like a drunken man!—Quiet thar! Quiet, Nebby! What ails you, boy?"

The dog was barking and whimpering in a peculiar manner, beside some bushes not very far in advance. They hurried forward to the spot, the bloody marks increasing in volume at every step.

"Whist! whist, Nebby!—Aha! the trail's sartainly come to an end. You folks needn't ha' brung yer rifles. The murdered leddy's revenged, and Mr. Wildfire's arer did it. Look thar!"

They already had their eyes on the spectacle which had arrested him. There, half buried in the bushes, lay the form of Mark Preston, stone dead, his white face turned upward, while a pool of blood crimsoned the ground beneath his neck, which was marked by a gaping wound.

CHAPTER XVII.

FINALE.

"GONE?" exclaimed Will, as he leaned heavily upon his rifle, near the opening of the tent.

"Yes," answered Pierce, from his easy-chair. "The doctor—who seems to know his business, by the way—decided that she could not be properly attended to here. She is comfortably fixed in the carriage, and they were walking the horses back to Coalville.—Don't look so glum, Will. It was not with her own wish she went. I promise you that."

"But—but," wavered Will, "the report? Is she safe? Is there any hope?"

"She is not one to die easily, my dear boy," was the encouraging response. "It is a dangerous wound. I admit that. But she will pull through it, if I am not sorely mistaken."

"What does the doctor say?" Will asked.

"That nothing vital is touched. The ball went deep, but it escaped the life organs; and he thinks he can extract it."

"Heaven grant that he may," Will fervently responded.

He walked for a few minutes restlessly about the camp, and then, with a gesture of impatient anxiety, took the road toward Coalville. He could not pass the night without further tidings.

The next morning the camp broke up, its materials being transported in a country wagon to the same locality.

"How's it come out?" asked Jerry Prime, as he met Will and Pierce the succeeding day, "I hope to 'tarnal gracious that it ain't goin' to be no serius hurt to the poor leddy."

"The doctor has extracted the ball," answered Will, "and she seems comfortable. We have every reason to hope."

"Waal, that's as good news as I've heered fur a fe'night. Ef that reprobate'd killed her, I'd feel like givin' his carcass to the dogs. It's lucky you peppered him, anyhow. He'd ha' giv' you trouble long as he stayed afoot."

"You are good on the chance shot," remarked Pierce. "You could never have made such a hit with a steady aim."

"I doubt if I could," answered Will. "What have you done with him, Jerry?"

"We guy him Christian burial. In the old graveyard down by the corners. Had the crowner up fast, though. He guy a verdict of justifiable homicide. Ef ye don't know what that means, I do, fur I axed him. It means that the murderin' hound got just what he deserved."

With a laugh at Jerry's definition of justifiable homicide, the two friends passed on toward the Coalville Hotel, anxious for the latest news from the chamber of the wounded girl.

She was being most tenderly nursed by her lady friends, and so far everything looked favorable.

"If no fever or inflammation sets in," said the doctor.

"But if they do set in?" queried Will, with an anxious look.

"Our fight will be harder, that is all. I hope to bring her through, in any case. Will you please let me change the dressing on your wounds, Mr. Brown-ing? You must feel dreadfully uncomfortable."

"Why I don't feel as sweet as if I'd been dropped into a barrel of molasses," Pierce grimly replied, "nor as limber as a fresh cut hickory switch. But, anyhow, I've got my bear. That's some comfort."

"And Mr. Wildfire brought down his game, too," laughed the doctor. "You are both good sports-men."

The hotel at Coalville was not very extensive, and the sudden irruption of guests had brought a strong pressure on its means of accommodation. In a day or two, therefore, the remaining members of the party set out for the city, leaving only Will and Pierce and the ladies in charge of their wounded friend.

One other remained, it is true; Will's right-hand man, the ebony-faced Pete. But he spent the greater part of his time down at Jerry Prime's cottage, having taken a strong fancy to that eccentric individual, and finding some elegant fishing in a neighboring brook.

Three weeks slowly moved by in the mountain village, three desperately wearisome weeks. At the end of that time Pierce's wounds were almost entirely healed. As for Clara, she had been attacked by fever and inflammation, as the doctor feared. But both were now allayed, and her wound had so far progressed toward healing that a removal to the city was pronounced perfectly safe.

Three more weeks passed by. They moved more rapidly, however, for the slow drag of village life had been replaced by the high pressure of a city existence.

"There never was such a piece of white oak as your humble friend," remarked Pierce, on meeting Will at the end of this period. "Sound from bark to core. There are some scars of bear's claws on my shoulder, but not a pain or ache left from head to foot. And that bear! You must come around and see him. Just the neatest bit of stuffing ever got up. You'd swear he was on the tree limb yet, with that same cynical grin with which he looked at Mark Preston that day. Pete called on me yesterday, and I introduced him suddenly to the bear. I vow I thought that 'cull'd person' was going to be scared white. 'Fore de Lord,' he said, 'it's jess alive! Needn't be tryin', Marse Pierce, to git dis nig near dat critter. Ain't a-gwine to be chawed up inter fish bait jess yit. No use tellin' me it's stuffed. Look at de b'ar's eyes! Why, he mought as well say right out, Come yere, Pete, an' be chawed!—but I ain't a-gwine, nohow."

After a mutual laugh at Pete's fright at the bear, Pierce asked:

"But how about our lady friend? I haven't had a bulletin for three days now."

"She is on the high road to health," answered Will. "Has been sitting up for a week. Come up and see her. I am on my way there now."

"Wish I could," replied Pierce. "But I've a trifle of business on hand. Will try and call on her to-morrow."

An hour afterward found Will in the sitting room of Clara Moreland's residence. She was sufficiently strong to be able to leave her room, and was now seated in an easy-chair, well propped up by cushions, and had a smile as warm as a June sunbeam with which to greet her welcome visitor.

"You do not know how well I feel," she exclaimed with animation. "Not quite as strong as I did on that day when we sat on the fallen tree together. You remember, Will?"

"Yes, indeed," he replied, drawing his chair closer.

"Your arm around my waist, do you recollect?"

Somehow Will's arm found again the same comfortable resting place.

"And—and—her eyes looked softly into his for completion of the sentence.

Will was not dull of comprehension. His lips met hers in a warm kiss. Her head lay restfully upon his shoulder.

"I am so happy," she murmured.

"And yet you have had a hard struggle for your life."

"But my friends have been so kind and gentle. And you, dear Will, you have been so loving and attentive to my slightest wish. It is no hardship to be sick when it brings one only love and kindness. And I have other reason for happiness. It was a terrible death which our mutual foe met; but I could never have been happy while he lived, with your life in constant danger from his treachery."

"And yours too, I fear. I am glad it happened as it did. I would have shot him, if we had overtaken him alive that day. It is better his death came from a momentary impulse. I have nothing to regret."

For an hour they sat thus, happy in each other's love.

It is but two weeks to Christmas, Will," she at length said. "And only one month after Christmas, you know?"

"Our happy wedding day will come," he replied, pressing a new kiss upon her rosy lips. "And there shall be nobody in the world as happy as we, my own dear love. But you must be entirely well by then."

"I shall be well by Christmas," she responded. "There is no medicine like happiness, no physician like joyful hope. The whole future is rosy before us, love. Our cup of life is brim-full of happiness."

But as to the future life of these two lovers we can

say no more here. The curtain of life's stage descends before our eyes, and cuts off the next scene in the eventful drama of their stirring histories. We may lift it again in some succeeding narrative, but for the present must leave them in the happiness of love's sweet hope.

The merry Christmas season came to all our friends with a mission of enjoyment. Clara was now quite able to go out, and one of their Christmas excursions was to the farm-house of Phineas Brown. More than Will and Clara took part in this excursion, for Pierce Browning, Harry Waters, Ben Huntley, Lucy Darling, and some others of the previous party, joined in the descent on the old farmer, the wrinkles in whose face smoothed out at sight of his gay young friends.

"You are welcome, all welcome!" he cried. "And I hope you have brought a violin. For I have lost all my dread of music since the night of our dance in the barn. We will have a happy Christmas dance to-night, if you wish. And you may demolish as many as you want of my wife's mince pies, and as much as you want of apples and cider. I wish you to have no end of innocent amusement out of this happy Christmas day. And I shall never frown again, while I can smile, as long as I live."

And they did have enjoyment out of it. Laughter woke up every corner of the old house; dancing feet shook its rafters; and the ghosts of gloom which had rested for years under its roof, started in sudden fright, and took wing from their old home, never to return. They could not abide within sound of music, laughter and youthful merriment.

And on this scene the curtain of our story falls just as farmer Brown and his wife again take the floor in a stirring country-dance.

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